SERMONS

CONTAINING

ANSWERS

TO SOME

POPULAR OBJECTIONS

AGAINST THE

NECESSITY OR THE CREDIBILITY

OF THE

CHRISTIAN REVELATION.

EIGHT SERMONS

PREACHED BEFORE THE

UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD,

IN THE YEAR 1799,

AT THE

LECTURE

FOUNDED BY THE REV. JOHN BAMPTON, M.A.

LATE CANON OF SALISBURY.

By WILLIAM BARROW,

FELLOW OF QUEEN'S COLLEGE, AND BAMPTON LECTURER.

LONDON.

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C. Lucilius dicere ſolebat, ea, quæ ſcriberet, neque ſe ab doctiſſimis, neque ab indoctiſſimis, legi velle; quòd alteri nihil intelligerent, alteri plus fortaſſe quàm ipſe.

CIC. DE ORAT. LIB. II. 6.

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Extract from the Will and Testament of
the late Rev. JOHN BAMPTON,
Canon of Salisbury.

—— "I give and bequeath my Lands and
"Estates to the Chancellor, Masters, and Scho-
"lars of the University of Oxford for ever, to
"have and to hold all and singular the said
"Land or Estates upon trust, and to the intents
"and purposes hereinafter mentioned; that is
"to say, I will and appoint, that the Vice-Chan-
"cellor of the University of Oxford for the time
"being shall take and receive all the rents, issues,
"and profits thereof, and (after all taxes, repara-
"tions, and necessary deductions made) that he
"pay all the remainder to the endowment of eight
"Divinity Lecture Sermons, to be established for
"ever in the said University, and to be performed
"in the manner following.

"I direct and appoint, that upon the first Tues-
"day in Easter Term, a Lecturer be yearly chosen
"by the Heads of Colleges only, and by no others,
"in the room adjoining to the Printing-House,
"between the hours of ten in the morning and two
"in the afternoon, to preach eight Divinity Lec-
"ture Sermons, the year following, at St. Mary's
"in Oxford, between the commencement of the
"last month in Lent Term, and the end of the
"third week in Act Term.

"Also I direct and appoint, that the eight
"Divinity Lecture Sermons shall be preached
"upon either of the following subjects—to con-
"firm and establish the Christian Faith, and to

Extract from the laſt Will and Teſtament of the late Rev. JOHN BAMPTON, *Canon of* Saliſbury.

—— "I give and bequeath my Lands and "Eſtates to the Chancellor, Maſters, and Scho- "lars of the Univerſity of Oxford for ever, to "have and to hold all and ſingular the ſaid "Land or Eſtates upon truſt, and to the intents "and purpoſes hereinafter mentioned; that is "to ſay, I will and appoint, that the Vice-Chan- "cellor of the Univerſity of Oxford for the time "being ſhall take and receive all the rents, iſſues, "and profits thereof, and (after all taxes, repara- "tions, and neceſſary deductions made) that he "pay all the remainder to the endowment of eight "Divinity Lecture Sermons, to be eſtabliſhed for "ever in the ſaid Univerſity, and to be performed "in the manner following.

"I direct and appoint, that upon the firſt Tueſ- "day in Eaſter Term, a Lecturer be yearly choſen "by the Heads of Colleges only, and by no others, "in the room adjoining to the Printing-Houſe, "between the hours of ten in the morning and two "in the afternoon, to preach eight Divinity Lec- "ture Sermons, the year following, at St. Mary's "in Oxford, between the commencement of the "laſt month in Lent Term, and the end of the "third week in Act Term.

"Alſo I direct and appoint, that the eight "Divinity Lecture Sermons ſhall be preached "upon either of the following ſubjects—to con- "firm and eſtabliſh the Chriſtian Faith, and to

" confute all heretics and ſchiſmatics—upon the
" divine authority of the Holy Scriptures—upon
" the authority of the writings of the primitive
" Fathers, as to the faith and practice of the pri-
" mitive Church—upon the Divinity of our Lord
" and Saviour Jeſus Chriſt—upon the Divinity of
" the Holy Ghoſt—upon the Articles of the Chriſ-
" tian Faith, as comprehended in the Apoſtles'
" and Nicene Creeds.

" Alſo I direct that thirty copies of the eight
" Divinity Lecture Sermons ſhall be always
" printed, within two months after they are
" preached, and one copy ſhall be given to the
" Chancellor of the Univerſity, and one copy
" to the head of every College, and one copy
" to the Mayor of the city of Oxford, and one
" copy to be put into the Bodleian Library; and
" the expence of printing them ſhall be paid out
" of the revenue of the Lands or Eſtates given
" for eſtabliſhing the Divinity Lecture Sermons;
" and the Preacher ſhall not be paid, nor be en-
" titled to the revenue, before they are printed.

" Alſo I direct and appoint, that no perſon
" ſhall be qualified to preach the Divinity Lecture
" Sermons, unleſs he hath taken the Degree of
" Maſter of Arts at leaſt, in one of the two Uni-
" verſities of Oxford or Cambridge; and that the
" ſame perſon ſhall never preach the Divinity
" Lecture Sermons twice."

ADVERTISEMENT.

As theſe Diſcourſes are now to appear before the Public, I beg leave to introduce them to the Reader by a few previous obſervations; that my deſign may be clearly underſtood; and the merit of the execution, whatever it may be, eſtimated upon its proper grounds. I think it alſo incumbent upon me to explain to the *Heads of Colleges*, who did me the honour to nominate me to the appointment, why theſe diſquiſitions appear to be calculated more perhaps for the Public, than the Univerſity; why I have written, rather Sermons for general peruſal, than lectures for a learned Society.

I have directed my arguments and my advice, ſuch as they are, where I thought they were moſt likely to be of uſe. When the Sermons were delivered from the pulpit, I wiſhed them to be underſtood as addreſſed more particularly to the younger ſtudents of Oxford; believing that the ſame ſtyle and manner would not be unſuitable to thoſe, by whom I ſhould afterwards wiſh them to be read. For it is almoſt needleſs to obſerve, that like thoſe of my predeceſſors in the appointment, they were always intended for publication; and are now to be conſidered principally in that point of view.

I have not attempted to inſtruct thoſe already learned in theology; for they want no aſſiſtance that I am able to give them; nor have I written for the loweſt and leaſt informed members of

of ſociety, for they muſt be taught their religious doctrines and duties by modes of inſtruction more expeditious and familiar than the ſtudy of books of controverſy. But between theſe two extremes are various and numerous claſſes of the community; men of ſome education, curioſity, and reading, though in very different proportions; and perhaps above all others, men of integrity, candour and docility. To the prudence, the ſpirit and the virtue of theſe men, we muſt probably owe, under Providence, whatever permanency we are to enjoy in our religious or our civil conſtitution: and what various attempts have lately been made to ſeduce them from their attachment to both, by inſidious and popular publications of almoſt every poſſible ſize and form, it is not neceſſary to ſtate; the fact is equally known and lamented. While therefore I have endeavoured to adapt

my

my reaſoning and my language to men of this deſcription, in order to confirm them not only in their belief of the Chriſtian religion, but in their adherence to its eſtabliſhment in the church of England, I hope I ſhall ſtand excuſed to the Univerſity for the plan I have purſued; becauſe I truſt it is fairly implied in the purpoſes for which the lecture was intended and appointed.

It is for this reaſon that I have entered but ſparingly and ſuperficially into any points of biblical learning; or any metaphyſical queſtions of theology. I have not purſued my arguments through all their various branches and collateral diſtinctions and dependencies; but haſtened by what appeared to me the ſhorteſt and eaſieſt way to my concluſion; and have ſometimes given rather the reſult of reaſoning, than its detail. I have not laboured to be elo-

quent;

quent; but to be perſpicuous. I have not intentionally diſguiſed my own ignorance or doubts in obſcure or ambiguous language; but endeavoured to be decided and explicit; that as far as my reaſoning is concluſive, it may have its effect; and as far as it is erroneous, it may be refuted. Inſtead of crowding my margin with notes of reference in oſtentation of learning, I have purpoſely omitted them; wherever the quotation was not conſidered as of eſſential importance. Nothing diſtracts the attention ſo much as the perpetual recurrence of notes of reference; and an ordinary reader ſeldom turns to a ſecond book, becauſe he was directed to it in the margin of the firſt.

To the learned, indeed, my quotations are all familiar; and to the unlearned references would be of little uſe.

For

For a reaſon of the ſame kind I have not been careful to point out the ſources from whence my arguments have been drawn. But as there is a moſt offenſive injuſtice in borrowing from a living author without acknowledgment; I feel it incumbent upon me to ſtate, that for the train of reaſoning in ſect. 7, of Sermon VI; and in I. 6, and II. 3, of Sermon VIII, I am indebted to a writer, to whom Chriſtianity itſelf is greatly indebted, the Rev. Dr. PALEY, the preſent Subdean of the Cathedral Church of Lincoln.

The objections I have endeavoured to meet, are ſome of thoſe which I have reaſon to believe are at preſent the moſt prevalent and popular. It is true that in theſe objections there is no novelty; and probably as little in the anſwers. But ſhould they have been urged a thouſand times before, and a thouſand

times

times refuted; ſtill as long as they continue to operate, ſo long will it be our duty to oppoſe them. A recent publication too may be read; when one of older date is unknown or neglected. A treatiſe profeſſedly technical, of whatever merit, will ſometimes excite diſguſt; while one more familiar and ſuperficial will attract attention, and perhaps bring conviction. A ſmaller volume will be taken up, when a larger would frighten indolence away.

This ſelection of various objections has in a great meaſure prevented, what moſt of my predeceſſors in the appointment have ſtudiouſly and laudably followed, an unity of deſign, and regularity in their plan. The points which I have conſidered could have only a more lax and general connection. But if the ſubjects have been unwiſely choſen, the want of unity is but a ſmall

aggra-

aggravation of the firſt error; and if they have been choſen well, the defect will be excuſed. It had been an eaſier taſk to fix upon a ſingle queſtion, and purſue it throughout. But this would have been to purſue a different purpoſe; to write for a different deſcription of readers. It might indeed have produced a work more claſſical and ſcholar like; but it could have had no effect upon the people; for by them it would not have been read.

As each of theſe objections is treated as much as poſſible independently of the reſt; as ſeveral of them muſt be refuted on the ſame general grounds; as they all relate to the ſame general ſubject; and all naturally terminate in the ſame point; it is probable that ſimilar ſentiments and obſervations are too frequently repeated. In ſome places indeed I have riſked the weakening of

my argument to prevent it: But in others it was preferred to referring the reader to what had been ſaid before, or what was to be ſaid afterwards; and in others ſtill, it was found impoſſible to be avoided.

A few occaſional notes have been ſubjoined; where it was thought neceſſary further to illuſtrate or enforce what had been more conciſely or curſorily ſtated in the Sermons.

If the apologies of an author could procure any real indulgence for the imperfections of his work; it might be very juſtly ſtated, that theſe Sermons are produced under at leaſt one peculiar diſadvantage. They have been wholly written at ſuch intervals of leiſure as could be found amidſt the duties of a profeſſion, of which the labour and anxiety are alone ſufficient to em-

ploy

ploy all the hours of the moſt active, and all the faculties of the moſt capacious, mind. But however important ſuch circumſtances may appear to the writer; they are of little conſequence to the reader.

Having been prevailed upon to undertake the taſk, I have performed it as well as my ſituation and abilities would permit. The Public, I believe, are always candid, and eventually juſt. If the Sermons deſerve notice, they will obtain it. If they deſerve it not, it cannot materially affect me. As an individual, I have no intereſt to ſerve by them; as a writer, I can have no reputation to loſe.

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1 PETER ii. 12. *Having your conversation honest among the Gentiles; that whereas they speak against you as evildoers; they may by your good works, which they shall behold, glorify God in the day of visitation.*

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the contraſt between human corruption, and the purity of the precepts, and the importance of the ſanctions, of the goſpel. 4. On the different nature of virtue and vice. 5. On a compariſon between the faults of Chriſtians, and the virtues of infidels. 6. On ſeeking the good effects of religion where they are leaſt likely to be found. 7. On the ſuppoſition that Chriſtianity has been the principal cauſe of religious perſecution, and religious wars. 8. On the pretended degeneracy of modern times. II. Chriſtianity has produced good effects upon the faith and morals of its profeſſors. 1. It has improved our religion. 2. It has placed morality on a baſis of univerſality. 3. Rectified the public judgment in morals. 4. Ameliorated the principles of civil policy. 5. Softened the horrors of war. 6. And aboliſhed the combats of the gladiators. 7. Specific inſtances of improved morality. 8. Comparative advantages of Chriſtianity over philoſophy—General concluſion.

SERMON I.

ON THE VARIETY OF OPINIONS AND TENETS IN RELIGION.

MATT. x. 34.

Think not that I am come to ſend peace on earth; I came not to ſend peace, but a ſword.

WERE we to form a compariſon between the courſe of nature and the conduct of men, and to attempt to reaſon from the one to the other, we ſhould continually find our analogies imperfect, and our concluſions erroneous. In the courſe of nature, as far at leaſt as our obſervations and experiments have enabled us to diſcover it, we perceive a ſyſtem the moſt regular and conſiſtent, effects correſponding to their cauſes with the moſt unbroken uniformity. When matter acts upon matter, the event varies only with variation in the circumſtances of the caſe:

the rapidity or duration of motion is always proportioned to the power by which it is produced; and the elements in their operations never violate the laws of their nature and ſituation. *The moon is appointed for certain ſeaſons, and the ſun knoweth his going down.* For this uniformity of nature, we perceive one important reaſon in its utility; in the advantages we derive from it, we acknowledge the wiſdom and goodneſs of the Creator. It is upon this that phyſical truth admits demonſtration; that the human intellect arrives at certainty; and that all our improvements in art and ſcience have been made. Upon his experience of this uniformity, the mechaniſt conſtructs his engine, and employs it; the huſbandman cultivates the ground; the mariner navigates the ocean; and in a word, men every where purſue their ordinary occupations, and ſupply the daily wants of life.

But when we examine the principles and the actions of men, in a moral view, we continually find what appears to us irregularity, confuſion, and inconſiſtency. Our knowledge of human nature riſes only to opinion;

opinion; we miſtake characters and motives; and we are able to judge of future events only by conjecture and probability. We have indeed been told, by the advocates of the doctrine of neceſſity, that the mind of man is as mechanical in its thoughts and actions as his perſon; that it is determined in all caſes by the irreſiſtible influence of the prevailing motive; and that were we ſufficiently acquainted with it, we ſhould perceive all its exertions and effects proceeding from their reſpective cauſes, with as much uniformity, as the moſt ordinary operations of nature. But till this neceſſity and uniformity ſhall be proved to exiſt, and their influence rendered intelligible to us, it cannot be unfair to aſſume as real that irregularity, which has all the appearance, and all the conſequences and miſchiefs of reality. In human conduct viſible effects are often very diſproportionate to viſible cauſes; and exertions, both in good and ill, are much more feeble or forcible than the motives by which they appear to be prompted. From our freedom of will, and conſequently of action, and from the impetuoſity, the combination, and the caprices of

our paſſions, it perpetually happens, that calculation is diſappointed, that argument or teſtimony does not produce conviction, or that conviction does not influence practice; that men frequently miſapprehend the conduct of others, and have reaſon to lament their own.

In common with every thing elſe, in which mankind have been concerned, the reception of divine revelation has been affected by the weakneſs of our nature, and the inconſiſtencies of our opinions and conduct; and affected too in proportion to the extent and importance of the object. In no other caſe does it appear, that argument and evidence have had leſs influence according to their natural weight; on no other ſubject have there been, in ſpeculative points, greater errors in reaſoning, and greater variety of opinions; or in practice, a wider difference between the effects that have actually been produced, and thoſe which might reaſonably have been expected. When the nature of revelation, as repreſented in ſcripture, is conſidered and underſtood; when the equity, the perſpicuity, and the ſanctions

of

of its precepts, the value of its bleſſings, and the gracious terms on which they are offered, are duly weighed, we might naturally expect that it would every where be heard with attention and favour, and engage univerſal aſſent and obedience; that it would indeed ſilence for ever the voice of diſcord and hoſtility, and unite all the ſons of men in piety, charity, and peace. Yet, in reality, ſuch would be the concluſion of him only, who had conſulted ſpeculation rather than experience, and who had attended more to the regular operations of nature, than to the caprices of the human heart.

Our Redeemer, *who knew what was in man*, foretold very different effects from his religion; and ſubſequent events have abundantly verified his predictions. *Think not*, ſays he, *that I am come to ſend peace on earth; I came not to ſend peace, but a ſword.* In this, however, he muſt be underſtood to expreſs, not the deſign and purpoſe of his appearance upon earth, but its accidental conſequences; what would ariſe, not from any imperfection in his revelation, but from human weakneſſes and paſſions. As if he had

ſaid, though the goſpel is intended by its author, and calculated by its nature, to produce benevolence and peace among men; yet will its rejection or perverſion be too often the occaſion of animoſity and contention, perſecution and bloodſhed. *An enemy hath ſown tares among the wheat*, and they have often choaked the good ſeed. *When the Lord of the vineyard looked that it ſhould bring forth grapes, it brought forth wild grapes.*

Why there has ariſen ſo great a variety of opinions and tenets in religion; why ſo many unbecoming controverſies have divided its profeſſors; and why the publication of the goſpel has been followed by events ſo much to be lamented, a few of the principal cauſes ſhall be conciſely ſtated and explained. And ſuch a ſtatement, it is preſumed, may not only tend to counteract the unfair uſe that is ſometimes made in argument of theſe unhappy diſſentions; but will form no unſuitable introduction to the examination of ſome of thoſe objections, that have been urged againſt the neceſſity or the credibility of the goſpel itſelf.

1. Sup-

1. Suppoſing for a moment, what our ſcriptures teach us is true, that the whole human race are deſcended from a ſingle pair; and that theſe were at firſt favoured with ſuch inſtruction from heaven, as was ſuited to their ſituation and capacity: admitting, alſo, what ſeems immediately to follow from the ſuppoſition, that religion was derived originally from a divine revelation, ſtill might a great variety of opinions on the ſubject be reaſonably expected amongſt mankind, from the natural effects of their encreaſe and ſeparation, of their diſtance from each other in time and place. As men became divided into different tribes and nations, and diſperſed into the various regions of the earth, and while their records were little elſe than oral tradition, truths would be not only incorrectly tranſmitted to diſtant countries, but even in the ſame imperfectly preſerved. To this let us add the effects of national pride, anxious to be thought the author of the doctrines it profeſſes; and of national hatred, ſtudious to differ from the inſtitutions of its enemies; and we ſhall then ſee one fertile ſource of that variety of religious ſyſtems, which have been eſtabliſhed in the world;

nor ſhall we be ſurpriſed to find theſe ſyſtems ſo far changed and corrupted, as to ſhew their genuine original only in ſome obſcure remains of a few fundamental truths, or in the faint traces of a few primeval rites and ceremonies.

2. When the goſpel was firſt offered to mankind, many of its doctrines appeared ſo novel in themſelves, and many of its precepts ſo hoſtile to worldly intereſts and paſſions; the one ſo much to contradict received opinions, and the other to condemn eſtabliſhed practices; that there was every reaſon to expect, what is well known to have happened, that it would find, not candour or favour, but enmity and oppoſition. It cenſured alike the *ſcience falſely ſo called*, and the corruption of morals; the ſpeculations of the philoſopher, and the ſuperſtitions of the people. It had, therefore, to contend with the various difficulties thrown in its way by the ignorance of the illiterate, and the ingenuity of the learned; by the vices of the ſenſual, and the authority of the powerful. Its claim to a divine original was diſputed or denied. Its teachers were deſpiſed and

inſulted.

inſulted. It was oppoſed at the ſame time by argument, and by perſecution. But there was yet another conſequence of the novelty of the doctrines of the goſpel, which I would more particularly point out, as more particularly the cauſe of that variety of opinions and tenets, for which I am endeavouring to account. Thoſe doctrines, even by ſuch as were diſpoſed to receive them, were often miſunderſtood and miſapplied, from a propenſity at once very natural and very fallacious, a propenſity to ſuppoſe them analogous to ſomething already known, and to interpret them conſiſtently with notions already familiar to their minds. One claſs of believers wiſhed to unite them with the rites and ceremonies of the law of Moſes; another, to reconcile them to the ſuperſtitions of the heathens; and a third, to aſſimilate them to the theories of the Greek philoſophy. Thus did difference of opinion begin with the very beginning of Chriſtianity: even in the times of the apoſtles, or early afterwards, in almoſt every church they had eſtabliſhed, were found diviſions, hereſies, and factions.

3. A vari-

3. A variety of opinions is found on every other ſubject to which human attention has been directed. From the different conſtitutions of the minds of men, from their different habits of thinking, and different degrees of capacity, diligence, or candour, the ſame argument produces very different effects upon them; the ſame object ſtrikes them in very different points of view. The theories of medicine, the principles of civil policy, and even the arts of the huſbandman and the manufacturer, ſtill furniſh materials for difference of opinion, for diſquiſition and diſpute. It is hence that we have, on one hand, the temporary evils indeed, of diſputation and controverſy, aggravated too often by perſonal animoſity and illiberal reproach; but on the other, the ſubſtantial advantages of enquiry and diſcovery, conviction, and truth. Why then ſhould we be ſurpriſed at the want of unanimity in religion, of uniformity in opinions and faith*?

It

* It may be objected that this compariſon is not compleat, and conſequently the argument founded upon it not concluſive. In the caſe of medicine or civil policy there is no divine revelation. Admitted. But the ſimilitude

It muſt be obſerved too, that religion is not in its own nature an object of indifference, which every man is at liberty to receive or to neglect, as may beſt ſuit his convenience and inclination. It is not, like many other branches of ſcience, a purſuit, on which one claſs of men depend for their ſubſiſtence or their fame, and in which others have only a remote and incidental concern. But it is a ſubject which, from its ſuperior importance and univerſal intereſt, will require and will excite very general and very ſerious attention; on which almoſt every man, who thinks at all, will think it incumbent upon him to form an opinion for himſelf, to fix his principles and his faith. It is a ſubject too of extent and difficulty equal to its importance. It reveals truths, which with the utmoſt exertion of our faculties we can but imperfectly comprehend; and teaches the general and fundamental principles of

ſtill holds far enough to anſwer the purpoſe for which it is employed. The genuineneſs, the authenticity, the inſpiration, or the age of each of the different books of ſcripture may be diſputed, like the ſoundneſs of the theories of Hippocrates or Plato; and the language of the former, as well as of the latter, may be interpreted in various ſenſes, and with various limitations.

our conduct, in all the multifarious relations of moral and ſocial life. No wonder then its doctrines are variouſly underſtood, and its precepts variouſly applied. No wonder it has given riſe to ſo many different ſects of ſo many different denominations.

4. At no great diſtance from what has juſt been pointed out, may be traced another ſource of this variety of opinions and tenets in religion. In the truths of revelation, as in the productions of nature, the Creator has left ſomething to be done by ourſelves, before we can enjoy the full advantage of his bounty. The mine muſt be dug before we can obtain the treaſure it contains; the field muſt be cultivated before we can reap the harveſt; and all our knowledge is the effect and the reward of attention and ſtudy. Thus it is with the bleſſings of the goſpel. They are not obvious at firſt ſight in their full magnitude and ſplendour. Without ſome degree of application and care, they cannot be underſtood; much leſs can they be obtained and enjoyed. The faculties, which our Creator has given us, he intended we ſhould employ, and employ them

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for our own good, in purſuit of that knowledge, virtue, and happineſs which he has in his mercy ſet before us.

For this indeed, a very important reaſon may be aſſigned. The bleſſing, which is purchaſed with little difficulty, is uſually enjoyed with as little gratitude and ſatisfaction. In ſcience, what is ſelf-evident, or ſuperficial, we are apt to deſpiſe: but we place a high value on the effects of our own inveſtigation. We always feel ſelf-complacency in our ſucceſs. In the ſcriptures, above every thing elſe, each new enquiry brings ſome new advantage; for it brings ſome new proof of the power, wiſdom, or goodneſs of the Deity; and conſequently ſome additional reaſon for our veneration, or ſome additional confirmation of our faith. And the truths diſcovered by our own induſtry and ſagacity, produce not only the greateſt ſatisfaction to the mind, but generally the ſtrongeſt conviction. The language of revelation itſelf is, *ſeek and ye ſhall find, knock and it ſhall be opened unto you.*

No

No wonder, then, all ſhould not with equal clearneſs diſcover, what yet all are bound to inveſtigate; and what each muſt in ſome degree interpret for himſelf, no wonder all ſhould not interpret alike. No wonder that accordingly as men poſſeſs different degrees of ability, diligence, or candour, they ſhould receive different impreſſions from the peruſal of the ſame ſcriptures; that they ſhould draw a variety of doctrines from the ſame general ſource; and even erect innumerable errors in opinion on the ſame baſis of infallible truth.

5. This variety of opinions and tenets in religion will be the greater too, becauſe by no religion with which we are acquainted, is ſuch variety precluded. Chriſtianity itſelf does not profeſs to eſtabliſh indiſputable certainty, either for its general baſis, or for its particular doctrines: but for the one, belief upon teſtimony, and for the other, tenets formed upon the interpretation of its records. With reſpect to the former, it was not intended to be irreſiſtible. Our Saviour did not *come down from the croſs* that the Jews might *believe him:* and *after his reſurrection*

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he ſhewed himſelf openly, not to all the people, but to witneſſes choſen before of God. We cannot wonder, therefore, that this teſtimony has not uniformly confined and fixed opinions; or that its ſufficiency has been frequently and boldly, however unreaſonably, called in queſtion.

With reſpect to the doctrines of Chriſtianity, it were not difficult to ſhew, from the abſtruſe nature of many amongſt them, on one hand, and from the weakneſs and limitation of human faculties, on the other, that on ſeveral important points demonſtration and certainty were not poſſible; and that all the proof has been given which the caſe could admit. But not to entangle ourſelves in metaphyſical ſubtleties, it is clear in point of fact, that the truths of our religion are not diſcovered by intuition, nor aſcertained by ſcientific demonſtration; that they come to us ſupported only by evidence and argument; that they are not the objects of knowledge, but of faith. The degrees of conviction produced will therefore naturally be different in different men; and almoſt every ſeparate article of the creed will find its enemies and

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its advocates. It is ſtill the privilege and the duty of reaſon, in the firſt place, to determine whether this religion is ſupported by ſatisfactory teſtimony; and conſequently whether it is to be received or rejected; and in the ſecond place, to judge whether its doctrines have been juſtly interpreted, and in what manner its precepts are to be applied in practice. And this power of deciding for ourſelves, this freedom of choice and action, we preſume, has been left us by our Creator; becauſe it was indiſpenſibly neceſſary to render juſt and equitable that reſponſibility for our conduct, which our religion has announced.

The liberty of the human will I always aſſume as admitted; becauſe if it be denied, all moral and religious diſquiſition immediately becomes nugatory and vain. If man be a mere machine, actuated by ſome ſuperior power; if all his thoughts and actions be the effect of a fixed and original neceſſity, or of a ſeries of cauſes, over which he has no influence; guilt and innocence, obedience and tranſgreſſion can be but empty

names,

names; and all that is left us is ſullen ſubmiſſion to irreſiſtible fatality.

6. This variety of opinions and tenets in religion has been encreaſed again, by the attempts which men have made to explain what has not been explained by revelation. In preſcribing the general rules of morality, and in teaching the principal articles of faith, our ſcriptures are ſufficiently clear and explicit: but they ſpeak the language of authority, not of critical diſquiſition; their deſign is to engage obedience, not to gratify curioſity. Their precepts are intended to form the fundamental principles of our conduct; but the application of theſe in the detail of practice is left to our own judgment and diſcretion. In them the obligations to our duty are founded, not upon the fitneſs of things, the beauty of virtue, nor any other diſputable baſis of philoſophy and ſpeculation, but on the ſimple and deciſive principle of the will of God. They aſſert the power, the providence, and goodneſs of the Creator; but do not enter into any metaphyſical diſcuſſion of his eſſence, his attributes, or his operations. In theſe points, however,

men have endeavoured to become wiſe *above what is written*; to ſpeak with minuteneſs and preciſion, where the ſcriptures have either employed very general terms, or been totally ſilent. Theſe explanations, it will eaſily be ſuppoſed, have been very different, and every man attached to his own. Various queſtions have therefore been agitated, not only on the true interpretation of every myſterious doctrine of our religion; but whether each ſuch doctrine could be an eſſential article of faith; and how far it may be our duty to believe what we cannot comprehend. Controverſies on points like theſe, indeed, have hitherto divided the Chriſtian world, and, except where the religion itſelf ſhall produce in its followers wiſdom and virtue ſufficient to ſuppreſs them, probably will divide it to the end of time.

7. Another ſource of this variety of opinions in religion is, a certain degree of obſcurity and ambiguity, unavoidable in all uſe of language, and therefore to be expected in the language of a divine revelation. We can, indeed, ſuppoſe it poſſible for the Almighty to have revealed his will in terms eſſentially

eſſentially ſuperior to all others, in a language ſo explicit and perſpicuous as to have been exempt from all difficulty and uncertainty. But this is a ſuppoſition without proof; and probability is againſt it. As men are to receive this revelation, the terms in which its ſublimeſt truths are conveyed muſt be in ſome meaſure adapted to the narrowneſs of human capacities: and as men are to interpret it for themſelves, or for each other, and to apply it to the regulation of their ſentiments and conduct, it will naturally feel the uſual effects of their infirmities and paſſions; the language of the books of revelation, in common with every other, will be often miſunderſtood and miſapplied.

It is not poſſible to prove, as has been juſtly obſerved, that in language the moſt familiar to us, any given number of interpreters annex preciſely the ſame idea to the ſame ſimple term. How differently then may different men be reaſonably expected to underſtand the general and comprehenſive principles of morality, or the myſterious doctrines of theology contained in the Chriſtian revelation! In the ſcriptures likewiſe,

the attributes and operations of the Deity, ſpirit and ſpiritual ideas, however novel to mankind as articles of faith at their firſt publication, muſt have been expreſſed in terms already known; like all other ideas too, in terms borrowed from material and ſenſible objects, and therefore by figure and analogy. The truths and precepts of our religion are conveyed to us in the language of a diſtant age and country; and conſequently, by tranſlations only can they be known to the great majority of mankind. They are expreſſed in terms alluding to the cuſtoms and manners of the times, to peculiar modes of thinking and acting, now known by little elſe than theſe alluſions themſelves. They are to be collected from a variety of treatiſes, hiſtorical, prophetic, moral, and religious, written by different authors at very diſtant periods of time. We receive them mixed with the annals of a people, whoſe civil and religious eſtabliſhment was different from every other known in the world; and whoſe hiſtory indeed is not ſo much an elaborate detail of political and military operations, for the amuſement of leiſure and curioſity; as a conciſe narrative

rative of important events, to diſplay the wiſdom, the power, and the mercies of Providence. No wonder then, ſurely, that ſo many theological controverſies have begun, or ended, in mere diſputes about the meaning of words. No wonder, under theſe circumſtances, that the upright, the pious, and even the learned, ſhould ſometimes have been led by miſtaken interpretations of ſcripture, to hold miſtaken doctrines; and ſtill leſs, that the ſuperſtitious, the ignorant, and the preſumptuous, ſhould have ſupported tenets, which the infidel may think himſelf entitled to ridicule, and the believer eſteem it his duty to refute.

8. Controverſies in religion have often been occaſioned by the wiſh, which almoſt every man feels, to propagate his own opinions. He wiſhes this in the firſt inſtance, perhaps, merely from the ſocial principles of his nature, without any further view than the ſatisfaction it immediately produces. But if he be ſeriouſly convinced that his own tenets are moſt agreeable to ſcripture, and therefore moſt conducive to ſalvation, he may not only innocently, but laudably, en-

deavour to teach others, what he conceives to be ſo much for their advantage. He will, however, find continual oppoſition. Hardly any man willingly admits he has been miſtaken; and leaſt of all perhaps on the ſubject of religion. The doctrines he has long profeſſed are not only familiarized by cuſtom; but are thought to be ſanctioned by his conſcience, and ſtamped with the authority of Heaven: and he defends them with the greater obſtinacy, becauſe confutation would diſturb his peace of mind, and, by alarming him for the ſoundneſs of his faith, impair his hopes of acceptance and ſalvation.

A deſire not leſs ardent, to propagate their peculiar doctrines, has influenced alſo whole ſects and ſocieties of Chriſtians. They have thought it meritorious, and therefore preſcribed it as a duty to their adherents, conſtantly to endeavour to make proſelytes to their own creed, to add to the numbers of their own church. And thus have the reſpective tenets of different individuals, or different ſects, been recommended on one ſide by every argument which zeal and ingenuity

nuity could ſupply, and oppoſed on the other, with equal diligence and ſkill, by thoſe who could not approve, or would not adopt them.

9. It has been the policy of almoſt all governments to ſecure, as far as poſſible, uniformity in the religion of the people. Each, therefore, has ordained its reſpective ſyſtem of doctrine and diſcipline, its articles of faith and ceremonies of worſhip, and with its civil inſtitutions united a religious eſtabliſhment. This again has been a ſource of diſcord and controverſy.

Various are the reaſons by which a man may be induced to cenſure, or to oppoſe, the religious eſtabliſhment of his country. He may object to it, either becauſe he may be ſincerely convinced that there are errors in its doctrines, and abuſes in its adminiſtration; or becauſe, in real or pretended zeal for freedom, he may condemn all reſtraint upon publiſhing religious opinions, and maintain that every man ought to be at liberty to worſhip God, and to perſuade others to worſhip him, in whatever way his judgment

moſt approves: he may become its enemy, becauſe his enemies preſide in and ſupport it; or becauſe he loves oppoſition for its own ſake, at leaſt to whatever he did not himſelf appoint, or does not adminiſter; becauſe he has been diſappointed of the honours or emoluments in it, which he fancies are due to his talents or his virtues; or, under the pretence of conſcientious ſcruples, he may aim his hoſtilities againſt the civil, as well as the eccleſiaſtical, eſtabliſhment of the ſtate, in the hope of overturning both, and riſing upon their ruins to power and diſtinction. The advocates for the eſtabliſhment, on the contrary, will defend it; they will vindicate its tenets, and aſſert its purity, or palliate its imperfections. The legiſlature itſelf, too, well interpoſes its authority to reſtrain ſuch diſſentions, or ſuppreſs ſuch doctrines, as threaten the tranquillity or ſafety of the ſtate. Governments, indeed, have not always confined themſelves in this point within the limits, which wiſdom and juſtice would have preſcribed. A ſovereign has ſometimes made the intereſts of religion the pretext to cover the deſigns of ambition; and ſometimes endeavoured to ſuppreſs offenſive

ſenſive doctrines by perſecution and penalties, or to propagate favourite tenets by power and compulſion.

It is not intended by theſe obſervations in any degree to determine, to what extent the interference of the civil power, in points of faith and worſhip, is injudicious or wiſe, juſt or unjuſt, neceſſary or oppreſſive. It is not intended to vindicate, or to condemn, either thoſe who ſupport eſtabliſhments, or thoſe who oppoſe them. The preſent purpoſe is merely to ſtate a fact, which will hardly be controverted; that the effect of forming and enforcing the doctrines of ſuch eſtabliſhments has too often been, not to ſpread conviction, but to provoke oppoſition; not to enſure unanimity and peace, but to excite diſcontent, remonſtrance, and diſſention.

10. Oppoſition to the doctrines of a religious eſtabliſhment has ſometimes been ſucceſsful; and the rejection of received opinions always opens a wide field for the introduction of novelty and variety. When men feel themſelves freed from the authority of their

their former faith, and are not yet duly influenced by any other; when they are relinquiſhing an old ſyſtem, and do not yet perhaps thoroughly underſtand that which is to be ſubſtituted in its place; while the boldneſs ſtill laſts, which led them to reject eſtabliſhed doctrines, and their new principles are not yet fully confirmed; in this interval the minds of men are open to every impreſſion, and liable to be ſwayed towards almoſt any point. The artful, the ambitious, and the fanatical, therefore, avail themſelves of the unſettled ſtate of opinions to publiſh and diſſeminate their notions and their theories, however abſurd, extravagant, or pernicious. Of theſe, many from their folly and inſignificance will ſoon be neglected and forgotten: but others, from the ſingularity of the tenets advanced, or the number of their adherents; from the ingenuity with which they are maintained, or their adaptation to the prevailing paſſions of the day, will riſe into notice and importance, and produce durable effects; will give occaſion to laſting controverſies, ſects, and factions.

From the ſame tendencies of the human mind, it is obſervable, that ſimilar circumſtances occur with reſpect to political opinions at every political revolution: and theories of civil government are produced not much leſs numerous, various, or extravagant, than the theories of religion. The tranſactions now paſſing in a neighbouring country may be adduced as an example of the latter; and the former is abundantly illuſtrated by the events and controverſies, which attended or ſucceeded the ſeparation of ſo many of the ſtates of Europe from the church of Rome.

11. Amongſt the cauſes of difference of opinion and controverſy in religion, muſt not be omitted a paſſion, which though it ſeems to be weak and puerile, is in reality one of the ſtrongeſt motives of human action; which every man profeſſes to deſpiſe, and almoſt every man labours to gratify: what I mean is vanity, the affectation of extraordinary talents and ſagacity. Every man loves diſtinction and pre-eminence; and never more ſo, than when they are founded on ſuperiority of underſtanding. To obtain there-

therefore, the reputation of ſuch ſuperiority becomes a very general ambition. But where one man honourably exerts himſelf, to deſerve this reputation, a thouſand perhaps, in order to obtain it, deſcend to the meanneſs of artifice or deception. A few nobly aim at the firſt rank in the fair field of truth; but a far greater number purſue it through the crooked paths of ſingularity and paradox. Yet they do not ſeem, more frequently to miſlead others, than to deceive themſelves. They labour to maintain fanciful theories, till their own arguments produce conviction in their own minds; they embelliſh error, till they embrace it as truth.

The profeſſors of religion, in common with the reſt of mankind, have felt the influence of vanity. From this motive alone, inadequate as it ſhould ſeem to others, and unknown, as it often is, to him whom it actuates, have many been induced to reject a received opinion, or to oppoſe the doctrines of an eſtabliſhed church; while others have been ſtimulated by the ſame motive to defend and ſupport them. Some have endeavoured,

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on one hand, to become the founders of new ſects, and *to call them after their own names*; and if they could not ſeduce the powerful or the wiſe, to have at leaſt the populace in their train: while others, on the contrary, have obſtinately refuſed to relinquiſh tenets, even when no longer able rationally to defend them; and both have contended for victory more than truth, not for religion, but for fame. *Theſe are they which receive honour one of another, but ſeek not the honour that cometh from God.*

12. Another ſource of difference of opinion in religion, or at leaſt of controverſy and its continuance, is prejudice. Almoſt every man entertains a partiality for certain opinions and doctrines in preference to all others; for thoſe which education inſtilled, and cuſtom has confirmed; for thoſe which he ſees generally profeſſed; for thoſe which are adapted to his natural temper and diſpoſition; or for thoſe which are maintained by men, to whoſe judgment or authority he has been accuſtomed to ſubmit; for thoſe, in ſhort, which have once, by whatever means, or from whatever cauſe, obtained firm poſ-

ſeſſion

ſeſſion of his mind. Man is, to a greater degree than ſuperficial obſervers will eaſily believe, the creature of habit; and habit is the parent of prejudice. From the conſtitution of human nature, or from its weakneſs and depravity, it is found neceſſary to prepare men, by education and cuſtom, for the ſtations they are deſtined to fill, previouſly and early to impreſs their minds with the requiſite opinions and principles, and to eſtabliſh, as far as poſſible, appropriate habits of thought and action. Againſt theſe prepoſſeſſions, indeed, declamation has been confident and plauſible, and againſt their exceſſes and abuſes, reaſonable and juſt. But on the contrary, it is to theſe we are indebted for much of the ſtability and conſiſtency of the human character, and for the greater part of our contentment and ſatisfaction in our reſpective ſtations; for many of the beſt ſentiments of our hearts, and for not a few of the beſt virtues of our conduct. Take away all that ariſes from cuſtom and prepoſſeſſion, and how little will remain of patriotiſm, of friendſhip, or even of natural affection. To theſe prejudices, however, whether reaſonable or exceſſive, whether

ther good or evil, the majority of mankind owe the greater part of their opinions; and theſe opinions are generally cheriſhed with peculiar fondneſs, and guarded with peculiar jealouſy. We conſider them not as being themſelves queſtionable in point of truth: but rather as a ſtandard by which other truths are to be tried. We continue to hold them, becauſe we have begun; we perſiſt in defending them, becauſe we have defended them before. In religion each maintains the truth of his own tenets, the ſuperiority of his own church; and that often with a zeal, which provokes the oppoſition it labours to ſilence, and with ſuch obſtinacy, as prevents the conviction it profeſſes to ſeek.

13. Amongſt the cauſes of this variety of opinions and tenets in religion muſt be reckoned the very frequent, though very miſchievous, weakneſſes of ſuperſtition and enthuſiaſm. Of ſuperſtition the natural tendency ſeems to be, to produce in its followers ſilence and ſubmiſſion. But by the abſurdity of its tenets, and its obſtinacy in adhering to them, it has provoked ſo much oppoſition or ridicule, as to have been frequently the cauſe

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of diſpute and diſturbance. It has overwhelmed the mind with groundleſs dejection and terror, and then miſtaken the ſuggeſtions of its own fears for the dictates of conſcience. It has repreſented all doubt on religious ſubjects as dangerous, and all enquiry as preſumptuous. It has interpreted literally expreſſions that are figurative and allegorical; and conſidered precepts as perpetually and univerſally binding, that were intended only as temporary and local regulations. It has lifted external ceremonies into ſuch importance, as to place them at leaſt on a level with moral duties; and on theſe, and a thouſand other errors, has founded ſuch wild and extravagant doctrines, as no ſound underſtanding can admit, and ſuch ſupernumerary and burthenſome duties, as hardly any man can fulfil.

Different and even oppoſite to theſe, in their nature and tendency, are the errors of enthuſiaſm. The diffidence and fears of ſuperſtition are now exchanged for familiarity and preſumption; and the illuſions of a heated imagination are miſtaken for the irradiations of truth. Enthuſiaſm does not

ſhrink with the apprehenſions of rejection and reprobation; but advances boldly in the confidence of election and grace. It does not ſo much fear to fail in practical virtue; as deem it an inferior and ſecondary point of duty. It rejects enquiry; becauſe truth is to be felt, rather than ſought; and deſpiſes learning, in the hope of illumination from above. Both, however, have found followers among the weak and the illiterate; and both have given riſe to ſects and hereſies; if not formidable by the rank or talents of their adherents, often troubleſome by their numbers and their zeal.

14. The laſt cauſe I ſhall mention of the variety of opinions in religion, and perhaps the moſt frequent cauſe of objection to it, is a vicious diſpoſition. *Every one that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, leſt his deeds ſhould be reproved.* The wicked man can enjoy the fruits of fraud, the gratifications of pride, and the pleaſures of licentiouſneſs, only by ſilencing his conſcience; and his conſcience can be effectually ſilenced only by getting rid of his faith, or of all attention to its ſuggeſtions.

It is by no means intended to inſinuate that all, who object to the truth of Chriſtianity, are prompted to urge their objections by their irreligious principles; that the errors of their underſtandings proceed from the corruption of their hearts. But as it will not be queſtioned, that unbelief has too often been wholly or partially occaſioned by inclination and paſſion; it cannot be unreaſonable or uncandid to aſſign a vicious diſpoſition, as one ſource of want of conviction in religion; as one cauſe, amongſt many, of doubt, dejection, and infidelity.

Bad men, however, are by no means always infidels upon enquiry and conviction. They ſeldom examine deeply the foundations of religion. Their minds ſeize upon ſome popular and ſuperficial objection; and their own propenſities and paſſions give it weight and effect. One fixes upon ſome circumſtance in the appearance or the operations of nature, which he conceives to contradict, and therefore to overthrow, the narrative in his bible; or upon ſome myſterious doctrine of revelation, which he cannot explain; and which he therefore concludes to be neither

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neceſſary nor poſſible to be believed. Another has diſcovered that there have been many fabulous religions in the world, and eaſily perſuades himſelf that Chriſtianity does but add one fable more to the number; or when he ſees it ſometimes perverted, and often diſobeyed, haſtily infers that its followers do not in reality believe, what they find it their intereſt to profeſs. A third, becauſe the truth of Chriſtianity does not ſtrike his own mind, or the minds of others, with reſiſtleſs conviction, cannot conſider it as a divine revelation; or becauſe his own experience has ſhewn him nothing miraculous, will not believe that miracles ever were performed.

Objections, like theſe, are too acceptable to a mind that wiſhes to find them true, to be examined with due care or candour. The vicious man flies from argument to his pleaſures; and labours leſs, perhaps without being ſenſible of it, to diſcover truth, than to avoid reflection. Thus is impoſed upon the advocates of religion and virtue, a taſk at once difficult and neceſſary, irkſome and almoſt hopeleſs; to give new attractions to

arguments which have loſt their novelty; to refute the ſame objections by the ſame anſwers; to preach to thoſe, who are not diſpoſed to hear; to convince men the moſt unwilling to be convinced.

Such appear to be the general and principal cauſes of that want of unanimity reſpecting the Chriſtian religion; of the numerous controverſies it has produced; and of thoſe various objections to its divine original; which its friends always lament, and in which its enemies often triumph. It is not to be ſuppoſed, however, that theſe cauſes have operated each ſingly upon ſome ſingle mind; that every inſtance of doubt or infidelity has been founded upon one ground of objection alone. Sometimes, indeed, each may have produced its effect by its diſtinct and ſeparate influence; but they have more frequently given force and ſupport one to another; and in different minds have probably been mixed and united in every poſſible mode of combination.

But if theſe, and ſuch as theſe, be the true and the only cauſes of our differences and diſſentions; the juſteſt inferences from them

them will be, not to the prejudice of a divine revelation, but powerfully in its favour. As far as objections to our religion have ariſen from ſuch cauſes as have been mentioned, the weight of theſe objections muſt be materially diminiſhed by the very ſtatement of the caſe; by accounting fairly for their exiſtence, without admitting their validity. If difficulties were unavoidable from the very nature of a divine revelation and the nature of man; let not Chriſtianity be rejected, becauſe it has neither violated the intellectual and moral conſtitution of its profeſſors, nor effected what was impoſſible while that conſtitution remained. If the variety of religious ſects and tenets amongſt us proceed wholly from our own weakneſſes and paſſions; let them not be urged as objections to the revelation itſelf, or as an imputation to the wiſdom or benevolence of its author. If Chriſtianity could not be more effectually, while rationally enforced; if irreſiſtible conviction could not be impreſſed upon our minds, without interfering with our freedom of will and action; it is ſurely no argument againſt it, that ſome have abuſed their freedom, and rejected its doctrines, or tranſgreſſed its laws.

If there have appeared reaſon to believe, that a large proportion of mankind are guided in their actions more frequently by the impulſe of the moment, than by the deciſion of their underſtandings; that even their opinions are as often the reſult of their ſituation and circumſtances, as of deliberation and conviction; and that their conduct is influenced by petty intereſts and vicious paſſions, more than by fixed and rational principles of duty; it will not ſurely be fair to conclude that the Chriſtian revelation is not credible, becauſe it has not been univerſally believed; or that its teſtimony is inſufficient, becauſe it has not always produced faith, or faith been followed by obedience.

But whatever be the true cauſes, or the fair inferences from them, the ſame cauſes will probably always operate, differences of opinion will always exiſt, and objections continue to be urged. Of inſtitutions, like the preſent, we are therefore furniſhed at once with the principle, and with the vindication. They are equally benevolent and judicious. They contribute to ſupply a conſtant antidote to poiſon conſtantly adminiſtered.

miſtered. One reaſon why Providence permits ignorance and vice in the world probably is, to prove and exerciſe the faith and virtues of the wiſe and good; and ſcepticiſm and infidelity in particular render it neceſſary for us to remove the doubts of the one, and to refute the objections of the other. The man of opulence, therefore, may honourably exert his liberality in providing inſtruction, and the learned believer his piety and talents in communicating it, in order to clear the difficulties in his religion, and to diffuſe more widely its truth and bleſſings. As long as the adverſaries of Chriſtianity continue their attacks, ſo long will it be duty and merit in its advocates to repel them; and each will take the ſtation, which he conceives to be moſt in danger, or which he thinks himſelf beſt able to defend.

The two principal and moſt popular ſources of objection to the Chriſtian revelation at preſent ſeem to be; that it was not neceſſary; and that it is not credible; that the light of nature and reaſon was ſufficient to direct mankind in their purſuit of virtue and happineſs, without other aſſiſtance; and

that if other aſſiſtance was neceſſary, this ſuppoſed revelation is clogged with ſo many difficulties, that it cannot reaſonably be believed and adopted, as furniſhing the aſſiſtance required.

To the former of theſe points, anſwers of great learning and ability have been repeatedly offered; ſuch, indeed, as might have been expected to ſuperſede all further diſcuſſion of the ſubject. But the objection ſtill claims our notice; for it is ſtill urged againſt us. In theſe times, indeed, it is inſiſted on with as much confidence, as if from its novelty no anſwer had yet been given; and with as much triumph, as if from its force it could not be anſwered. The beaten track, therefore, muſt be again traced. In addition to the anſwers already produced, one more ſhall be attempted.

With reſpect to the objections drawn from the ſecond ſource; that all ſhould be noticed in the preſent lectures, is not practicable, and will not be expected. It is intended to ſelect a few ſuch as ſeem to have an effect upon men in our own times; ſuch as occur

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in the converſation or the writings of the preſent day; and to attempt a reply to them, in a way ſo far popular and familiar, as may be not unacceptable to thoſe who are either not profeſſionally engaged in theological ſtudies, or not deeply ſkilled in the queſtions that are agitated reſpecting the doctrines or the eſtabliſhment of our national church. That any new arguments will be produced, it were preſumption to pretend; nor can it be expected they ſhould eaſily be found. The Chriſtian religion is limited to the truths contained in its own records. To theſe no addition or diminution can be allowed. The arguments too, by which it is ſupported, are coeval with the religion itſelf: and from its nature and importance it has engaged the attention of the wiſeſt and beſt men in every age ſince its promulgation to the world. All the objections, and all the difficulties, which the ſubject can admit, have probably long ſince been urged; and conſequently all have been repeatedly examined and diſcuſſed. Some difficulties are capable only of one adequate ſolution; and of the various anſwers applicable to others, the beſt, no doubt, have already been employed. A few illuſ-

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trious individuals, by the exertion of ſuperior powers of mind, or by the judicious or fortunate direction of their ſtudies, have occaſionally thrown an additional ray of light on the evidence or the doctrines of our faith. But all its other advocates muſt be content with the humbler taſk of producing the ſtores already provided; and adapting them to the occaſions by which they appear to be required. The novelty, however, which it is thus difficult to find, we conceive not to be neceſſary to the cauſe in which we are engaged. It cannot reaſonably be demanded from us, till either new difficulties ſhall be brought forward, or the modes of reaſoning already employed ſhall appear inſufficient to convince the ſincere and candid enquirer. With the ſame arms, with which we have ſo often triumphed, we may ſtill hope to conquer. But our adverſaries have lately endeavoured to adapt the ſtyle and form of their objections to the taſte and capacity of the moſt ordinary readers; to give their artillery ſuch a direction and level, as may be likely to do the moſt extenſive miſchief: and we muſt prepare to meet them on their own ground. The champion of Chriſtianity muſt

muſt regulate his defence by the nature of the attack. It ſeems neither uſeleſs nor unneceſſary in theſe times, to reduce the ſubſtance of more learned diſquiſitions into more familiar forms, and to compreſs them into a narrower compaſs; to collect from every quarter, ſuch arguments as appear the moſt appoſite and deciſive; and to preſent them recommended, if not by eloquence and erudition, at leaſt by modeſty and candour; if not by their depth or novelty, at leaſt by their conciſeneſs and perſpicuity. If the preſent preacher can produce that which the learned and the judicious may hear without diſguſt, and by which the young, the gay, or the uninformed may be perſuaded to think and to enquire, he ſhall conſider his time and attention as having been well employed; and the taſk as fulfilled, which he undertakes to perform. To ſupport the cauſe of religion and virtue very different methods may be purſued; and the moſt promiſing will not always prove the moſt effectual. By the interpoſition of heaven, Chriſtianity was at firſt propagated by means and inſtruments apparently very inadequate to their object; and at this day the higheſt

higheſt or humbleſt abilities, the weakeſt or the moſt powerful effort, muſt depend for its efficacy and ſucceſs on the favour and bleſſing of heaven. *Paul planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the encreaſe.*

SERMON

SERMON II.

ON THE NECESSITY OF A DIVINE REVELATION, FOR THE INSTRUCTION OF MANKIND IN RELIGION AND MORALITY.

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1 COR. I. 21.

The world by wiſdom knew not God.

THE firſt and broadeſt ground of objection, to what we receive as a divine revelation, has generally been, that it is not neceſſary; that mankind do not ſtand in need of ſuch preternatural inſtruction and aſſiſtance, as it profeſſes to communicate. The Creator, ſay the adverſaries of revealed religion, has given to man the faculty of reaſon; and by the native powers, or by the due improvement, of this faculty, he is enabled to attain all the information, that is neceſſary to his enjoyments or his virtue.

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He is enabled, they maintain, not only to aſcertain the rules and principles of good morals; but to urge ſufficient arguments and motives to enforce the practice: to collect ſatisfactory evidence, not only that he is at preſent in a ſtate of probation and reſponſibility; but that he is deſtined for a future and more permanent exiſtence; in which he muſt receive the juſt recompence of his merits or his crimes. He is enabled to diſcover, they aſſert, not only the exiſtence of a Supreme Being; but his attributes and perfections; not only that he has been the author *and giver of life*; but that he will hereafter be the judge of our conduct; or in the language of revelation itſelf; *that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently ſeek him.* From theſe premiſes they conclude it to be improbable and incredible, that the Almighty ſhould give, what was not wanted; that he ſhould, without uſe or neceſſity, contrive and conduct the extenſive and complicated work of the redemption of mankind by the goſpel; and that it is much more probable, this ſuppoſed revelation is the invention of human policy; either the pious fraud of the benevolent, to allure men

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into peaceable ſubjection to the laws of ſocial order; or the artifice of the ambitious, to keep the timid and the weak in ſubjection to the cunning and the bold.

If unaſſiſted reaſon were really able to diſcover, all that is here aſcribed to it, the neceſſity of a divine revelation, as far at leaſt as it is a ſyſtem of moral inſtruction, would certainly be ſuperſeded. But if according to the obſervation of Cicero, to ſay that no man has been wiſe, and that no man can be wiſe, amount to the ſame thing; if it be fair to aſſume, that men are not able to do, what in fact they have never done; then will it not be difficult to ſhew, that reaſon cannot effect what the objection ſuppoſes; that it is not a ſufficient guide, or ſufficient authority, in our purſuit of truth, virtue, and happineſs.

1. The light of reaſon is not ſufficient in each individual *. It is not impreſſed upon

* Lord Herbert, Tindal, and other advocates of natural religion, in oppoſition to revelation, maintain that God has implanted in the mind of every man the true principles of religion and morality.

the minds of infants; for it does not appear in them; nor is it able to direct them, ſo early as direction is required. The child, for the moſt obvious reaſons, is long guided by the authority of his parents and preceptors; before he can be truſted to be maſter of his own conduct. The youth and the man are frequently called upon to act, before they have fully ſettled their principles of action; to perform their part in many important ſcenes of life, before they are qualified to reaſon largely or ſkilfully; before they are able to judge between oppoſite motives; to ſurmount the difficulties of complicated caſes; and to decide with wiſdom and juſtice. Nor does this light and intelligence appear to burſt at once upon the mind, at any ſubſequent period of life; for all the improvement our faculties receive is obviouſly gradual and progreſſive. The knowledge and principles of our duty, then, are not originally impreſſed upon the mind; but inſtilled by education and inſtruction; they are not diſcovered by intuition, or infuſed in a moment; but acquired by time and ſtudy; they are not the endowment of nature; but the reſult of obſervation and experience.

Whence

Whence this information is really and originally derived, ſhall hereafter be enquired. Admitting at preſent that men may obtain it, by the due improvement of their faculties, by education and inſtruction, by obſervation and experience; how ſhall we expect to find it in thoſe, who are in a great meaſure deſtitute of theſe advantages. By far the greater part of mankind are obliged to employ their whole time and attention, to procure the neceſſaries of life. To this object their education and inſtruction have been confined; and their obſervation and experience ſeldom extend much beyond it. From the hour they have ſtrength to wield the implements of huſbandry or manufacture, they are compelled to daily labour, to earn their daily bread. In them, therefore, reaſon is not only little cultivated and improved; but becomes in a great degree incapable of cultivation; by long diſuſe, by the labour of the body, and the various hardſhips of their ſituation. And if it be not able to direct them, without ſuch improvement and aſſiſtance, as it is impoſſible for them by their own efforts to obtain; it is fair to conclude, that the light of nature is not ſufficient in

each individual to teach the principles, and to enforce the practice, of good morals; much leſs to give them, what is indiſpenſibly neceſſary to the former, rational notions of a Supreme Being and his providence, of their dependence and reſponſibility. Such men are under the neceſſity of doing, what indeed by ſuch men is every where done; of taking their rules of faith and morals, of principles and conduct, in a great meaſure upon truſt from thoſe, whoſe judgment and inſtruction they eſteem, or to whoſe authority they find it convenient to ſubmit.

This conſideration will appear of ſtill greater weight if we reflect, that the rules of morality, when firſt announced, are not all ſelf-evident and indiſputable: many of them require examination and proof, before they bring conviction. They are maintained by different men on different grounds; and various reaſons are aſſigned for the rules themſelves; and ſtill more various, for their authority and obligation.

It ſeems fair to aſſume too, that if the light of reaſon were ſufficient, in each indi-

vidual,

vidual, to diſcover right principles of faith and action, each individual muſt certainly diſcover them. Otherwiſe, the Creator muſt have beſtowed a faculty, for a purpoſe which it does not anſwer; and the endowment is a mockery. That each individual, however, does not diſcover them, is too obvious in point of fact, to require argument or evidence. Nor will any ſuppoſed neglect or abuſe of our reaſon ſatisfactorily account for ſo extraordinary a failure; or, upon the hypotheſis of the objector, vindicate the wiſdom and juſtice of the Creator. No time can be ſpecified when it was ſucceſsful; no ſuch inſtances can be produced, as will warrant any general concluſion in favour of its ſufficiency: no individual can be named, who adopted and fixed his opinions, by the exertions of his own reaſon alone; who, without inſtruction or aſſiſtance, formed for himſelf a ſyſtem of religion and morality.

Another argument, againſt this ſufficiency of reaſon in each individual, may be drawn from the general uniformity in natural endowments. Our ſenſes, our paſſions, and our inſtincts, in themſelves, and in their

operations and effects, unleſs where they are occaſionally controuled by ſome ſuperior influence, are regular and univerſal. They may differ in degree, but not in kind. Had this ſuppoſed light of reaſon then reſembled other natural endowments; it muſt have reſembled them alſo in the regularity of its effects. And as truth and right, the greateſt and the beſt objects of its reſearch, are always the ſame; every man muſt have diſcovered the ſame articles of faith, and the ſame principles of conduct. The rules of morality would have been every where alike; and the doctrines of religion uniform and conſiſtent. But how far this is from being the caſe, the moſt ſuperficial inſpection of hiſtory will inform us. Not two nations upon earth, whoſe ſentiments are known to us, however ſimple in their opinions and manners, preciſely agree in their religious doctrines, or rules of practice. Not a civilized people can be found, with whoſe hiſtory we are acquainted, who have not at ſome time or other changed, in important articles, their ſyſtem of faith, and in ſome points, their precepts of morality. Nor can a nation be pointed out, that is not diſturbed

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by ſects, hereſies, and factions *. In the populace this might not be allowed to have much weight in point of argument; becauſe they may have been led aſtray, by the influence of a celebrated name, by the policy of power, or the authority of conqueſt. It ſtill, however, proves the want of unanimity amongſt mankind; and the truth is, that amongſt the more exalted in rank or

* It will be obſerved, perhaps, that ſimilar changes have taken place in nations profeſſing to believe the Chriſtian revelation. And if we admit the fact, even in its fulleſt extent; it will not much affect the argument. But between the conduct of heathen and Chriſtian nations in this point, a remarkable diſtinction may be obſerved. The latter have differed in opinion, or changed their opinions, not upon what conſtituted the ſtandard of truth and duty, but only upon the interpretation of it; while the former have diſagreed or varied in their ſentiments about the ſtandard itſelf. It is, indeed, one of the obvious advantages of Chriſtianity, that its doctrines and precepts are preſerved in a fixed and authoritative record; to which appeals may always be made; either to prevent difference of opinion; or to determine ſuch controverſies as happen to have ariſen: and though from the nature of the ſubject, and the errors and infirmities of mankind, diſputes will probably always exiſt; they will be leſs frequent, and on points of much leſs importance, than if we had either no fixed ſtandard; or none but ſuch as reaſon and human authority could have eſtabliſhed.

talents not much more uniformity will be found. Not a philoſopher can be named, who was in all points of religion and morality decided in his opinions; or at all times even conſiſtent with himſelf; and how little they agreed with each other, their numerous ſects and endleſs diſputations will abundantly inform us. The academic ridiculed the ſtoic; the epicurean derided both; and the ſect of the ſceptics is ſaid to have taken its riſe from the diſſentions of the reſt. The light of nature then has not enabled each individual to diſcover any rule of conduct that is, what ſuch a rule evidently ought to be, clear and uniform, conſiſtent and univerſal.

2. If then the light of nature and reaſon was not ſufficient in each individual, to teach right principles, and to enforce good morals; the next poſſible ſuppoſition is, that it was given in the requiſite proportion to a certain number, for the inſtruction of the reſt; that a few were peculiarly endowed, for the benefit of the whole. But before this ſuppoſition can be admitted, it will be incumbent upon its advocates, if in reality any ſuch be found, to point out the individuals they

they mean; who they are, whoſe inſtructions it will be our advantage to receive, and our duty to obey. It is true that individuals, poſſeſſing talents greatly ſuperior to thoſe granted to mankind in general, have appeared at different periods, and in different nations, of the world. It is true, that they have made ſuch diſcoveries or improvements in art and ſcience, as might juſtly entitle them to be conſidered, as men ſent by heaven to be a benefit and a bleſſing to their fellow-creatures. It is true, that many of them have, by their abilities and their induſtry, obtained high diſtinction and authority in life, and been honoured, and even deified, after death. But it is not true, that any individuals have appeared, poſſeſſing an indiſputable claim to be conſidered, as the inſtructors of the human race in morality and religion. None have appeared with knowledge in theſe important points, ſo evidently ſuperior to that of all others, that the reſt of mankind would voluntarily acquieſce in their opinions and deciſions. None have appeared, who could teach what was requiſite to be known, and ſupport what

they taught by ſuch argument and evidence, as it was impoſſible to refute. None in ſhort have appeared, who could communicate ſuch a ſyſtem of morals, and ſtill leſs, ſuch a ſyſtem of religion, as could either claim the general approbation, or engage the general obedience, of their fellow-creatures. All who have written ſince the publication of the goſpel are here out of the queſtion. By the illuſtrious characters of earlier times the point muſt be decided. For the Chriſtian revelation is that very inſtruction and aſſiſtance, for the neceſſity of which, to them and to ourſelves, we are to contend.

Nor muſt it be forgotten, that the honours we pay to the ſages of antiquity, and indeed the honours they beſt deſerve, are not ſo much abſolute as relative; not ſo much for the diſcoveries they actually made, as for their diſcoveries compared with their means of making them; not ſimply for the information they acquired and communicated; but for having acquired and communicated ſo much, when they had received ſo little; when the full diſcovery of the word and will

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of God had not yet been vouchſafed to mankind. We have indeed a prepoſſeſſion of gratitude in their favour. From the ſtudy of their writings we have received much of the beſt improvement of our minds; they were formerly the inſtructors of our youth; and they now conſtitute the amuſement of our age. But the taſte of the critic, the eloquence of the orator, or the beauties of the poet, are not now to be examined. We are at preſent to conſider them merely as inſtructors in religion and morality; and their excellence in other reſpects muſt not blind our judgments to their defects in theſe. Whatever eſteem we may entertain for Socrates; a ſtill greater eſteem is due to truth. We are not to err with Plato; but to hold faſt *the form of ſound words* in the goſpel of Chriſt.

Admitting, however, a few illuſtrious individuals to have learned, from whatever ſource, the true principles of morality, and even ſufficient knowledge of religion to enforce them; it will ſtill remain to be ſhewn, by what marks theſe men could be with certainty

tainty diſtinguiſhed as public inſtructors; by what characteriſtics, internal or external, they could prove the authenticity of their doctrines; and by what motives and authority engage others to hear and to obey them. If their inſtructions were recommended only by their ſuperior wiſdom; and if their precepts were enforced only by their own utility; none would be convinced of their value, but ſuch as were able to judge of it; thoſe who moſt wanted, would not regard them. As to any external characteriſtics, the fact need not be diſproved; for it cannot be ſupported, by any plauſible argument or evidence. They did not quote any prophecies fulfilled in their perſons and conduct: they did not appeal to any miracles, which the power, who ſent them, had enabled them to perform. We know that Numa profeſſed to be aſſiſted in the formation of his laws by a nymph of the foreſt; Lycurgus, by the oracle of Apollo; and Minos, by Jupiter himſelf. But theſe were evidently convenient fictions; deſigned to give the authors weight and authority with the illiterate and ſuperſtitious populace; who were neither very able nor much

much diſpoſed, to queſtion, or to examine, the truth of their pretenſions. Had they been furniſhed with real and ſubſtantial evidence of a divine commiſſion; it ought and it would have been brought forward to public view. It would not have conſiſted ſolely of the aſſertion of thoſe, who were under the ſtrongeſt temptations to a fraud; becauſe moſt to be benefited by its ſucceſs: but it would have appeared in a form adapted to the capacities of thoſe, whom it was intended to convince. It would not have borne, as it now does, every mark of pretence and impoſture; but the plain and genuine features of authenticity and truth. It is worth while to obſerve too, that the artifice, to which Numa, Lycurgus, and Minos had recourſe, is no mean evidence; both that they had heard of divine communications to men; and that ſome ſuch revelation, as we contend for, was in their opinion neceſſary, to ſecure the virtue of individuals and the peace of ſociety. But whatever may be thought of the expedients, or the opinions, of the ancient legiſlators and moraliſts; if Providence has not given, to any public inſtructors among the heathens, indiſputable marks

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of their office, or indiſputable proofs of their authority; we muſt inevitably conclude, that no ſuch inſtructors have been ſent; none, whom mankind are bound to receive and to obey.

3. If then it be true, that the light of nature is neither ſufficient of itſelf in each individual, to teach and regulate our faith and practice; nor that a few have been peculiarly endowed and commiſſioned for the benefit of the whole; the only ſuppoſition remaining, to ſupport the ſufficiency of reaſon, is, that the requiſite information is attainable, by the united and ſucceſſive exertions of mankind. But if it was not ſo attained before the publication of the goſpel; we may be allowed to conclude that it was not attainable at all: and that it was not ſo attained, will appear from the ſlighteſt examination of the faith and ethics of the heathens.

Their religion was univerſally idolatry: and the whole multitude of their deities were ſuppoſed to be *of like paſſions with themſelves*; whoſe caprices, cruelties, and luſts conſti-

tuted

tuted the articles of their faith, and the ſubjects of their devotions. Theſe deities were worſhipped, not only under various forms of the beaſts of the field and the fowls of the air, but of a thouſand different images of wood and ſtone, *the work of men's hands*; and the infatuated populace often miſtook the repreſentation for the original; and addreſſed, not a ſublime and inviſible divinity, but the brute, the reptile, or the ſtatue, as the ultimate object of their adoration. Nor were the eſtabliſhed forms of their devotion, as will eaſily be ſuppoſed, more pure or dignified than their creed. They were indeed either ſuch rites and ceremonies, as were devoid of all rational uſe and meaning; or ſuch as could not be practiſed, and cannot be ſtated, without offence to decency, and to good morals. Their ſyſtem of faith was therefore injurious to the dignity and honour of the Supreme Being; and their worſhip ſuch as muſt have been, not only offenſive to the proper object of worſhip, but prejudicial to that morality, which it ought to have purified and improved. On the licentious character and tendency, however, of the heathen mythology, and on the groſſneſs of

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their ſuperſtition and idolatry, it is not neceſſary that I ſhould enlarge; for they have been ſtated and expoſed, till the ſubject will hardly excite attention; till our conviction is almoſt forgotten in wearineſs and diſguſt.

* But it has been maintained in their defence, that ſuch was the creed only of the vulgar and illiterate; that the populace, indeed, from their ignorance and credulity, might believe all the extravagant tenets of their theology; and that the magiſtrates might ſupport them for the purpoſes of policy; but that the philoſophers not only deſpiſed and cenſured, what we ſo juſtly condemn; but knew and maintained the fundamental article of true religion, the unity

* Varro and Plutarch make a triple diviſion of the antient theology; into the fabulous, which belonged to the poets; the popular, which was ſupported by the laws; and the phyſical, which belonged to the philoſophers: and Gibbon, with ſome reference to ſuch a diviſion, and with more attention to the epigramatic turn of his ſentence, than to its accuracy, has told us; that "the various modes of worſhip, which prevailed in the Roman world, were all conſidered by the people as equally true, by the philoſopher, as equally falſe, and by the magiſtrate, as equally uſeful." Rom. Emp. Chap. 2.

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of the Godhead. This has indeed been repeatedly aſſerted, but it has not been proved. The philoſophers, inſtead of expoſing the popular theology, as void of foundation in truth, and in its tendency prejudicial to good morals, united with their fellow-citizens in the cuſtomary rites of devotion; and declared it to be impious and criminal to queſtion the truth, or diſturb the ſolemnities, of the religion of their anceſtors. Some ſects, indeed, endeavoured to palliate even the poetical mythology; by repreſenting it as myſtical, emblematical and allegorical fable; veiling the truths and operations of nature, under the ſuppoſed tranſactions of their deities; and poſſeſſing a depth and ſignificancy, which the poets themſelves do not appear ever to have had in contemplation; and which the academic in Cicero has ſucceſsfully ridiculed and expoſed. Nor ſhall we be much diſpoſed to extol this philoſophy, when we reflect; that it was either not able, or not inclined, to deviſe a better ſyſtem of faith and worſhip, to be adopted by the people, and enforced by the magiſtrate. It is indeed much eaſier to tell what is wrong, than to teach what is right; to expoſe error,

to diſcover truth*. They might have pointed out the weakneſs of particular articles, or demoliſhed the whole fabric, of the popular ſuperſtitions; but they were not therefore prepared to erect the luminous edifice of true religion. Socrates, though condemned to an ignominious death, for his ſuppoſed contempt of the deities of his country, carefully performed all the rites of the eſtabliſhed religion †. Cicero, in his treatiſe on the nature of the Gods, has not more diſplayed his eloquence as a writer, than his inability to give ſatisfactory information on the ſubject ‡. And when

* What was ſaid by Baudius of Eraſmus reſpecting his religious opinions, may with great juſtice be applied to moſt of the antient philoſophers; Videtur magis habuiſſe quod fugeret, quàm quod ſequeretur; he ſeemed rather to have determined what to reject, than what to believe: and Cicero with equal truth and candour declares, "Utinam tam facile vera invenire poſſem, quàm falſa convincere;" I wiſh I could as eaſily diſcover truth, as I can refute error.

† Xenoph. Mem. et Apol. Socr.

‡ Had this celebrated treatiſe ended with the ſecond book, it might have been more ſatisfactory to the reader, becauſe the author would have appeared to have ſatisfied himſelf. But the third involves us again in inextricable difficulties and perplexity. The treatiſe does not ſupport the

when the Athenians enquired of the oracle, what religion they ſhould profeſs; the anſwer was, the religion of their anceſtors *. The people then, the philoſophers, and even the Gods themſelves, were almoſt equally ignorant, what ſyſtem of faith and worſhip was the trueſt and the beſt.

Our uſual habits of reaſoning lead us to expect, that ſuch as were the tenets of religion amongſt the heathens, ſuch would be their precepts for practice; that their morality would be as corrupt as their creed. But this, though unhappily too much the caſe, is by no means univerſally true. The principles of virtue are, in their own nature, much leſs abſtruſe and difficult than the doctrines of theology; and the ſages of antiquity did not perceive that cloſe and in-

the popular religion; but entirely overthrows it. It does not adopt the tenets of any particular ſect of philoſophers; but ſtates and refutes them all. As far as a tendency to any particular ſyſtem is diſcoverable; it is either towards the atheiſm of Strato; or towards that pantheiſm, which is at leaſt as antient as the verſes aſcribed to Orpheus, and ſince better known as the doctrine of Spinoza. But the whole terminates without concluſion or deciſion.

* Cicero de Leg. 2. 16.

timate connection between religion and morality; of which better information has enabled us to ſee the neceſſity and the advantage. With them the latter did not derive excluſively from the former its principle, its model, and its ſanctions. Their ſyſtem of ethics, however, though much leſs defective than their tenets of religion, was ſtill at a wide diſtance from perfection. Many of our moral and ſocial duties, indeed, they have enforced by every argument which genius could invent, and recommended by every ornament which eloquence could beſtow. But they were not poſſeſſed of any certain and univerſal principle of good morals—Each has admitted ſome vice amongſt the virtues he preſcribes *.

Amidſt

* Lactantius and others have obſerved, that from the writings of the various heathen moraliſts a ſyſtem of ethics might be collected, as compleat as that of the goſpel itſelf. Perhaps the fact might be queſtioned. But allowing it to be true; it is not to be expected that each individual ſhould ſearch from Ariſtotle to Cicero, and from Plato to Seneca, in order to ſettle his principles and rules of action: and had each individual leiſure and inclination to undertake the taſk, what is to be his guide in performing it? by what means is he to diſtinguiſh what to adopt, and what to reject? This might form the amuſement of a man of learning;

Amidſt the faireſt flowers of heathen morality, is always found a mixture of weeds or poiſons. The principle and the rule of rectitude aſſumed by Cicero is, what he calls right reaſon; and this, after ſome obſcure and unavailing diſquiſition, he determines to be the reaſon of the Supreme Being. But were this information juſt; for want of advancing one ſtep further, it is wholly without effect or uſe. He has not, and he could not inform us, how the reaſon of the Supreme Being is to be known. With reſpect to practical morality; *Theodorus permitted theft and ſacrilege; and †Ariſtotle has recommended reſentment and revenge. The perfect republic of ‡Plato did not exclude the practice of falſhood; and it ordained the moſt unwarrantable licentiouſneſs. Even §Epictetus and ‖Antoninus themſelves al-

ing; but not the inſtruction of the ignorant. Lactantius himſelf admits, that he only could accompliſh this, who had been previouſly taught of God. He only could erect, from the materials of Pagan antiquity, the fabric of perfect morality, who poſſeſſed already the model in the bible.

* Diog. Laert. Lib. 2. † De Morib. Lib 4, 5.
‡ De Repub. 3 & 5. § Differt.
‖ Ant. Medit. Lib. 3, 5, 10.

lowed their wiſe man to ſeek refuge from affliction in ſuicide.

But admitting they had been perfect in the practical virtues they recommended; there are other points, eſſential to our duty or our peace, which they have not taught. They have not, for example, accounted on any rational principle for the mixture of good and evil, of vice and virtue in the world; for the occaſional proſperity of the wicked, and the affliction of the juſt. All we can learn from them on this important ſubject, either has little meaning, or brings little ſatisfaction. By one ſect we are taught, that all ſublunary events are under the direction of a blind and capricious chance; by another, that they are regulated by an irreſiſtible fatality; and by a third, that there are two original and oppoſite powers in nature; a malignant demon, the cauſe of evil, as well as a benevolent being, the author of good. And for one of the moſt neceſſary parts of human duty, patience in adverſity and reſignation to the divine will, they have recommended little elſe, than either to ſeize, with the Epicurean, whatever enjoyment the preſent

preſent hour allows; or to acquire, with the Stoic, an unnatural indifference and inſenſibility.

4. Admitting, however, ſtill farther, that they had been able to teach every part of human duty; by what arguments could they have proved that the doctrines they taught were truth; and that the precepts they delivered, it was incumbent upon us to receive? Allowing even this to be accompliſhed; by what authority could they have prevailed upon the reſt of the world, or by what motives induced them, to practiſe what was taught? The table of Cebes will ſhew, that as they could not diſcover what would conſtitute our real happineſs; they could not urge any adequate and efficacious motives to our duty. They have indeed purſued the enquiry with great diligence; but by no means with as great ſucceſs.

The native beauty of virtue, and the love of virtue for its own ſake, was a language, which they either ſuppoſed to contain much meaning and argument; or which they employed, becauſe they had nothing more de-

ciſive to urge in the cauſe. It was, however, a notion much too abſtracted for common minds; too ſhadowy for the baſis of duty; and perhaps never influenced the conduct of a ſingle man. It was only the meteor of fancy; not the ſunſhine of truth. It might amuſe the imagination; but could not illuminate the underſtanding.

As motives ſomewhat more ſubſtantial, though in their eſtimation of inferior value, they have urged the regard uſually and reaſonably paid to health, to fortune, and to reputation *. But without entering into a minute

* The following obſervations originally made a part of the text; and may, perhaps, ſtill be thought not unworthy of a place in a note. With reſpect to the firſt; the injury to health from the practice of vice is not immediate or certain: for many vices may be practiſed, by which the health is not affected: and even licentious indulgencies are not always followed by diſeaſe, nor do they always viſibly ſhorten life. The argument drawn from thence, therefore, in favour of virtue may be oppoſed as inconcluſive. The effects, on which its force depends, are not univerſal and inevitable. But whatever may be the real force of the argument, it is not likely to ſecure good morals. We are all too apt not to fear pain, while we do not feel it, And though regard for their health will in a certain degree always

minute examination of theſe conſiderations, it may ſafely be aſſerted, that each ſeparately is either too limited to be of general uſe, or too feeble to be efficacious. The force of each indeed varies, not only with the varieties of climate, government, and public opinion; but with the age and ſtation, ſentiments and habits, of almoſt every individual. And whether they act ſingly or in conjunction, they are too irregular and uncertain in their influence, to form the principle of good morals;

always influence the prudent and the temperate; it will never be, on one hand, an effectual check to violent and headſtrong paſſions; nor on the other, an effectual incitement to the more laborious and painful duties of life.

With reſpect to the regard for property, as the principle of morality; it is in its own nature perfectly indifferent; and can become a reſtraint upon vice, or a motive to virtue, only according to the previous diſpoſition of him by whom fortune is poſſeſſed, or by whom it is deſired. The ambition to obtain opulence and its advantages, if not under the direction of better principles, may not more frequently ſtimulate the exertions of honeſt induſtry, than the efforts of artifice and fraud. Though the apprehenſion of injury to his fortune will often reſtrain a man in moderate circumſtances; it can have little weight with him, whoſe ampler ſtores are equal to the moſt expenſive

morals; and too indefinite in their meaning and eſtimation to be our guide in practice.

In aid of theſe motives have been urged, therefore, the inſtitutions of civil policy. The laws of our country, it may be ſaid, ought to form a perfect rule of duty; and the authority of the magiſtrate enforce the performance. But, not to mention that if reaſon calls in the aid of human laws ſhe acknowledges, as mere reaſon, her own inſuf-

gratifications. And our own obſervation and experience may convince us that the poſſeſſion of wealth, far from being itſelf the principle of good morals, too often encourages ſuch guilty paſſions as it furniſhes the means to gratify. It depends wholly on the poſſeſſor, whether property become the inſtrument of his virtue, or the miniſter of his vices.

The care of character and the love of fame have indeed prompted many to exertions the moſt honourable, and actions the moſt brilliant: but what good effect can theſe motives have upon thoſe, who indeed moſt want ſuch incitements, but are leaſt ſenſible of their influence, the mean ſpirited and the depraved! They will always ſacrifice what they conceive to be the ſhadowy advantages of reputation, to the more ſubſtantial pleaſures of eaſe, gain, or ſenſuality.

ficiency;

ſiciency; theſe laws themſelves may be unjuſt, or unjuſtly adminiſtered; and what ſhall rectify their irregularities, and make us amends for any injuries we may have ſuſtained? The wiſeſt and the beſt human inſtitutions cannot always puniſh crimes, and much leſs prevent them; and they ſeldom attempt to reward virtue; but as they happen to be ſerviceable to the ſtate. Nor will they ever be able to confine within the bounds of duty, thoſe who are daring enough to hazard the penalties they threaten; thoſe who fancy themſelves powerful enough to reſiſt, or artful enough to elude them.

In the political eſtabliſhments of antiquity, at leaſt, it will be in vain to ſeek the principles or precepts of perfect virtue. Their legiſlators paid perhaps too much attention to the aggrandiſement of the ſtate; and certainly too little to the morals of the people. Their ſyſtems of policy, like the ethics of their philoſophers, were all debaſed by ſome mixture of abſurdity, inhumanity, or corruption. If we examine what remains of the boaſted inſtitutions of Lycurgus or Solon, or of the laws

laws of the Twelve Tables; we ſhall find that they all ordained or countenanced what was incompatible with good morals; unwarrantable licentiouſneſs *, or the expoſure of their children; the combats of the gladiators, or the murder of their ſlaves.

That theſe motives do in fact poſſeſs a large ſhare of weight and utility in human life, is too obvious to be denied. The united conſiderations of health and fortune, character and law, muſt always have a powerful influence on mankind. Within their proper limits they are indeed very valuable and very laudable principles of action. They have, no doubt, on one hand, often checked the artifices of iniquity and the efforts of violence; and on the other, often prompted to exertions and atchievements highly honourable to the individual, and beneficial to ſo-

* The defects of heathen laws and heathen morality might perhaps be moſt ſucceſsfully expoſed, by inſiſting on the licentiouſneſs, which they did not in almoſt any caſe prohibit with ſufficient rigour, and which they too often expreſsly encouraged. But from the nature of the ſubject as much evil is probably avoided by waving the argument, as good could be obtained by ſtating it more at large.

ciety.

ciety. But in the moſt important point they all equally fail. They conſtitute only prudence and policy; not the moral principle required. They may prompt, or they may reſtrain, the hand; but they cannot rectify the heart and the intention. They have often enforced the offices of decency or juſtice; but cannot exalt them into virtue and merit. Cicero himſelf aſſerts, that practiſed upon theſe motives, juſtice itſelf is not virtue.

To this muſt be added, as a motive to duty urged by many of the heathen philoſophers, the immortality of the ſoul, and the rewards and puniſhments of a life to come. But though theſe are doctrines, without which religion loſes its principal value, and morality its firmeſt ſupport; we ſhall not find them either univerſally or rationally maintained by the ſages of antiquity. Theſe doctrines were indeed, like almoſt every other, diſputed by the Sceptic, and by the Cynic ſurlily denied. The Epicurean ſought in his pleaſures, and the Stoic in his apathy, the happineſs of the preſent life, with very little

little regard to any thing beyond it. Even amongſt thoſe who maintained a ſtate of retribution hereafter, their notions and their accounts of it are ſo doubtful and obſcure, ſo full of fable and inconſiſtency; that it muſt have been difficult for them to perſuade themſelves of the reality of what they taught on the ſubject; and ſtill more difficult to give it weight and efficacy on the minds of others. Socrates employed many arguments to prove the immortality of the ſoul; but before his judges he left it undecided, whether he expected death to lead him to a ſtate of peaceful inſenſibility; or to the company and converſation of the great, the wiſe and the good *. Of all the arguments of antiquity on the ſubject, the beſt are undoubtedly to be found in the writings of Plato; yet of theſe, ſays his greateſt admirer, the Roman orator; when I read them, I am convinced; but when I lay the book aſide, and reflect upon them in my own mind, my conviction is gone †. Cicero's own reaſoning on the ſame important queſtion terminates in the unſatisfactory conclu-

* Plat. Phædo. † Tuſc. Quæſt. 1. 11.

ſion;

ſion; that if he was miſtaken in his belief, he was pleaſed with his error, and no man ſhould raviſh it from him*.

5. As

* De Senect. ſub finem.—In his philoſophical treatiſes Cicero has made ſeveral of his characters ſpeak ingeniouſly and eloquently on the ſubject of a future ſtate, and the immortality of the ſoul. But in his letters he appears to give up the point; and to be of a very different opinion. For in theſe he conſtantly repreſents death as the end of all things; as a ſtate of perpetual inſenſibility. "Mortem nullum ſenſum habituram," "finem doloris," et "omnium rerum extremum," is the language not only of ſeveral different letters; but, I believe, on every occaſion, where the mention of death is followed by any reflexion upon it. And on the letters, it ſhould ſeem, notwithſtanding Dr. Middleton's reaſoning to the contrary, the greateſt dependence ought to be placed. His philoſophical diſquiſitions, in imitation of thoſe of Plato, are thrown into the form of dialogue; and each of the characters may therefore be ſuppoſed to ſpeak, not ſo much the opinions of Cicero, as thoſe of the ſect he repreſents; and to urge the arguments, not which appeared to the author concluſive; but the beſt which his ſide of the queſtion admitted, or were then known. It is only indirectly, or by ſuggeſtions in ſome other parts of his writings, that we can learn who ſpeaks the ſentiments of Cicero himſelf. But in his letters he is under no ſuch reſtraint; nor is he under the influence of any ſuch paſſion or intereſt, as ſhould lead him to diſguiſe his real opinions. Had any favourite hypotheſis engaged much

5. As an addition or an improvement to theſe arguments of the ancients, modern philoſophers have urged as the rules or motives of human duty, benevolence, honour, conſcience, and a moral ſenſe. But each of theſe may in a very few words be ſhewn to be, either vague and indefinite as a rule, or feeble and inefficacious as a motive.

With reſpect to benevolence; it is not yet determined whether it is a principle inherent in our nature, or an acquired virtue, or both united. And when that queſtion ſhall be ſettled, it will be ſoon enough to enquire, whether it be in reality felt by all mankind; in what degree it ſhall operate towards thoſe whom we have not ſeen or known; by what force it ſhall prevail over perſonal or national enmity and provocation; and direct our conduct in oppoſition to all our ſelfiſh and corrupt paſſions.

much of his thoughts, it muſt ſomewhere have made its appearance in ſo much friendly and confidential correſpondence. What is ſaid in the letters may fairly be conſidered as expreſſing the ſettled ſentiments of his mind.

With

With reſpect to honour as a rule of conduct; not to urge that the term itſelf is not preciſely defined; it is confeſſedly a ſentiment not innate and natural, but artificial and acquired; not uniform and univerſal, but local and variable; not founded upon any known and general principle, but upon the judgment and caprice of the individual; and unhappily its laws are as cruel and ſanguinary, as they are uncertain and indefinite.

With reſpect to conſcience, as the principle of moral conduct; it has not only been variouſly explained in theory; but in practice has been ſuppoſed to dictate very different, and even oppoſite, rules of action. I ſhall, however, venture to adopt the definition given by Locke, as too juſt to be controverted, and too clear to be miſunderſtood. "Conſcience," ſays he, "is nothing elſe, but our own opinion or judgment of the moral rectitude or pravity of our own actions *." Its being right or wrong, therefore,

* Buddeus has left us a definition of conſcience ſo cloſely reſembling this of Locke, that the coincidence would

fore, a ſafe or an erroneous guide, depends upon previous information. It is a rule, which muſt itſelf depend upon ſome other rule already known: it is the interpreter, not the maker, of the moral law; and far from being a public and general principle, it is known only to the poſſeſſor; and may be different in every different individual.

As to the moral ſenſe, if it be not nearly another name for conſcience, it is not eaſy to ſay what it is. If it be conſidered as ſentiment, rather than reaſoning; as that power in the mind, by which we are enabled inſtantaneouſly to decide between right and wrong; when we ſeem rather to feel than to think; it then coincides with one or other of the rules or motives already examined; it is either acquired benevolence, conſcience in-

would appear remarkable, could one avoid ſuſpecting that the German theologiſt muſt have ſeen the *Eſſay* of the Engliſh Metaphyſician. He was the younger man by more than thirty years. Conſcientia nobis nihil aliud ſignificat, quàm argumentationem hominis de actionibus ſuis ad legem relatis, ut earum hinc aut pravitatem aut bonitatem colligat. Inſt. Theol. Moral. cap. 1. 3.

formed

formed and matured, or honour ripened into habit.

By modern philoſophers, again, it has been ſuppoſed and maintained, that man might aſcertain the rules of his duty by the exertions of his own underſtanding; becauſe he might diſcover its utility and obligation in the natural fitneſs of things; in the immutability of truth; or in the eternal diſtinctions between right and wrong.

It is true that by obſervation and experience we diſcover in the conſtitution of nature a wiſe and wonderful adaptation of one thing to another; the ſubordination and ſubſervience of every part to the whole; a mutual relation and dependence between the vegetable, the animal, and the rational productions; and that each, while it preſerves its proper place and influence, contributes to the ſubſiſtence, to the utility, or to the enjoyment of all the reſt. But this proves little with reſpect to human duty. It may indeed ſuggeſt a probability, that there will be the ſame propriety in the exertions of wiſdom and virtue; it may lead us to ſuppoſe, that

ſimilar advantages in the moral world would reſult from the due diſcharge of moral duties; and what analogy ſuggeſts, obſervation tends to confirm. But probability is not certainty; analogy is not demonſtration. Obſervation of the ſame kind led the heathen philoſophers to a very different concluſion: for it led them very early to idolatry; either to worſhip excluſively the hoſt of heaven, prompted by its magnificence and its benefits; or to ſuppoſe the univerſe itſelf one perfect and bleſſed Being, which it was their duty to adore *,

The immutability of truth is to be conſidered, much in the ſame light, as the fitneſs of things. In our arts and ſciences the ſame

* It has been very juſtly obſerved too, that the fitneſs of things cannot form a perfect rule of conduct, unleſs it be perfectly known to us: and it cannot be perfectly known in our preſent ſtate; becauſe we cannot know all things, and all their relations. We do not by any means fully underſtand our own nature, and our relation to each other; and ſtill leſs our poſſible, and even probable, relation to other creatures above or below us, to our Creator, to the whole ſyſtem of things, or to a future ſtate. This rule of duty, therefore, muſt always be imperfect, in proportion to the imperfection of our knowledge.

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premiſes always lead to the ſame concluſions; one demonſtration invariably confirms another; and in all our experiments, ſimilar cauſes are conſtantly followed by ſimilar effects. We conclude therefore that the ſyſtem holds univerſally; that phyſical truth is every where the ſame, and immutable. But this proceſs of inveſtigation has not yet been ſucceſsfully applied to the diſcovery, or the ſupport, of the principles of morality. And though it has been ſuppoſed, that moral duties may admit ſcientific demonſtration; till that demonſtration is effected, the poſſibility is no clear or ſure foundation of human virtue: the demonſtration itſelf would hardly be authority and obligation.

With reſpect to the eternal diſtinctions of right and wrong; it is not intended to call the doctrine in queſtion; but to place it on what appears to be its true foundation. By the advocates for the ſufficiency of reaſon theſe diſtinctions ſeem to be maintained, as ſomething inherent in the nature of things, wholly independent of the will of the Creator; as an original and over-ruling neceſſity, which omnipotence did not eſtabliſh,

and cannot change. But ſurely he who created all things, created all their relations and diſtinctions. How far it was in the power of the Almighty to have formed different creatures with different relations; or to have created us with other qualities and other duties; it is indeed uſeleſs to enquire: but with our limited knowledge of the Deity, the poſſibility cannot be diſproved. His own nature and attributes only can ſet bounds to the operations of omnipotence. We doubt not but the preſent conſtitution of every creature is congruous to the perfections of the Deity; and from the rectitude, as well as the immutability, of the great Creator, we take it for granted, that neither the relations and fitneſſes of things, nor our duties that are connected with them, will undergo any change, while the things themſelves and the human race ſhall continue to exiſt *. But this

* It has been aſked whether a miracle may not be conſidered as effecting a change in the nature of things. To which it may be very ſafely anſwered; that a miracle does not make any ſuch change as will invalidate the obſervation. A miracle produces an effect without any adequate natural cauſe; or ſuſpends or alters the operation of natural

this regularity is an effect; and cannot govern its own cauſe. It is a quality not inherent, but derived; not original, but dependent. Suppoſing, however, the diſtinctions of right and wrong to be in the ſtricteſt ſenſe unchangeable and eternal; what but the decree of the Almighty could give them the nature and force of law? by what voice or authority otherwiſe could they have required, or by what ſanctions enforced, ſubmiſſion and obedience?

With this fitneſs, with this truth, and with theſe diſtinctions, the moral law of the Chriſtian revelation every where agrees. Our religion is admirably and invariably ſuited to

tural cauſes, to a certain extent, and for a ſpecific purpoſe. But in the mean time every thing beyond the influence of ſuch miracle proceeds in its regular courſe; and even where its influence was exerted, the particular purpoſe being anſwered, the uſual order of cauſes and effects again takes place; beginning however with that ſtate of things which the miracle has occaſioned. A miracle, it may be obſerved again, is in its own nature an exception to every general law; and therefore in reaſoning to every general obſervation: and indeed to argue againſt changes, whether miraculous or natural, is the buſineſs of thoſe who maintain abſolute immutability; not mine who deny it.

the nature of things: and the faireſt inference ſeems to be; not that we could by the one have diſcovered the other; but that both, at different periods and in different ſtates of the world, proceeded from the ſame beneficent author. The ſyſtem and courſe of nature would not perhaps have ſuggeſted the idea of their own Creator; but abundantly confirm it when ſuggeſted. And with this concurs, in a thouſand paſſages, the language of ſcripture. But the different portions of ſcripture were all addreſſed to men, who had been previouſly inſtructed in the exiſtence of the Deity. They were not intended to teach what was already admitted; but to give ſatisfaction in believing, by producing evidence of what was believed. What then is the fitneſs of things in nature, but the ordinance of their Creator; what are the eternal diſtinctions of right and wrong, but the appointment of the Almighty; and what the immutability of moral truth, but the word of God?

6. It will not be foreign to the ſubject of the ſufficiency of reaſon, to point out a few of the contradictions of her philoſophy; of the

the oppoſite concluſions drawn from the ſame premiſes, by the moraliſts of different times. Reaſon has been the cauſe of ſo many errors, perplexities, and miſchiefs in the world, that the academic in Cicero maintains, it cannot be conſidered as a benefit and a bleſſing to mankind. But the modern Deiſt thinks it able to diſcover truth; and to teach us all our moral and religious duties. Many of the antient philoſophers taught that actions were juſt or unjuſt, not by the appointment of nature, but only by the dictate of the law. And as many moderns teach the eternal and unalterable diſtinctions between right and wrong. It has been maintained, that the philoſophers of antiquity might have obtained the idea of an immaterial Being, or of God, by conſidering the nature of their own immaterial ſouls. But it does not appear that they ever poſſeſſed the idea of pure ſpirit at all; of a ſubſtance without any of the qualities of matter: and by many of the moderns this immateriality of the human ſoul is itſelf denied. The contemplation of the courſe of nature and the fitneſs of things led the antients into polytheiſm and idolatry; to worſhip the hoſt of heaven. A ſuper-

ficial examination of them has induced ſome modern philoſophers to aſſert the eternity of matter and the world; to doubt or deny a Creator and a providence. Plato has aſſerted, that when men engage in diſquiſitions on the ſubject of the Gods, none of their notions take their riſe from the human underſtanding; and Cicero declares that he believed in the Gods of his country, only on the authority of his anceſtors. Yet numbers in our own times maintain, that reaſon alone can diſcover the exiſtence of the Deity; and even demonſtrate his attributes and perfections. Modern philoſophers aſſert it to be the dictate of nature, that the parent ſhould ſupport and educate the child; yet the antients formerly, like the ſavages at this day, expoſed or deſtroyed as many of their children, as their convenience or caprice happened to ſuggeſt. The moderns think, with Socrates, that the laws of nature require the children to honour, to aſſiſt, and ſupport in their age or neceſſity, thoſe from whom they have derived their being. But many of the ſages of antiquity, with the ſavages of our own times, held it juſtifiable to deſtroy their parents; when age or infirmity

mity had rendered them burthenſome to their families or to the ſtate. Inſtances, like theſe, of concluſions ſo oppoſite from premiſes ſo ſimilar, may ſurely convince us, that unaſſiſted reaſon is not ſagacious enough for our inſtructor in theology; not certain enough for the principle of duty; nor uniform enough for our guide in practice.

7. Suppoſing it poſſible, however, that reaſon could deviſe equitable and efficacious rules of conduct, between the different individuals of the ſame country and community; a taſk yet more difficult remains to be performed; to eſtabliſh and enforce the principles of juſtice between different and independent nations, in their friendly or hoſtile intercourſe with each other; in their commerce or their wars.

What have been uſually called the laws of nations have had all the defects of municipal laws, and many others of their own. The terms themſelves have been indefinitely underſtood, and variouſly explained; and the laws, far from being, what ſuch laws evidently ought to be, uniform and univerſal,

ſal, have never been even general or conſiſtent. They have not only been different in different nations; when thoſe nations have differed from each other in their ſentiments, their habits, and their degrees of civilization; but even in the ſame country they have been often changed; as changes have taken place in the circumſtances or opinions of the people or their ſovereigns. They have not been formed upon any certain and acknowledged principles; they have few eſtabliſhed precedents; few general maxims; and few regular analogies. For reaſon has not yet decided, whether they are founded upon nature or compact alone, or upon both united. They are indeed little elſe than maxims and uſages mutually admitted by independent ſovereignties; as long as their utility in each particular caſe is mutually confeſſed: and it appears from the hiſtory of mankind, that nations have rarely expected each other to adhere to them; when a more immediate or more important intereſt was likely to be promoted by their violation. By what perſuaſions, indeed, by what menaces or penalties, ſhall nature and reaſon ſecure us againſt wantonneſs in the commencement

of

of war, or inhumanity in the proſecution of it; againſt abſurdity or injuſtice in the formation of treaties, or treachery in their violation; or againſt any other artifice or outrage, which, however ſtigmatiſed abroad, can be applauded as patriotiſm at home. Could laws, however, for independent nations, be deviſed of the moſt perfect equity and wiſdom; ſtill with reaſon alone to ſupport them, they muſt want, what is eſſential to all laws, the acknowledged authority of a common ſuperior, to inforce ſubmiſſion and obedience. The only common ſuperior of kingdoms is he by whom they were created; and their only authoritative rule of conduct, the precepts of his revelation.

It is true that nations, profeſſing to believe the Chriſtian revelation, too often violate its precepts in their tranſactions with each other. For it is true, more frequently perhaps in the conduct of nations than of individuals, that the influence of corrupt paſſions, or the proſpect of immediate intereſt, prevails over juſtice and principle. But the queſtion here is, not whether the laws of nations, as founded upon the precepts

cepts of revelation, have been violated or fulfilled; but whether they are wiſe and juſt in themſelves, and founded upon adequate authority: not what crimes have been committed by the errors and tranſgreſſions of individuals; but what has been ordained and approved, by the deliberate decrees of a ſenate, or the unbiaſſed voice of a people. That revelation has not yet had its due effect on the morals of mankind, has indeed been urged by the gainſayer, as an objection to its efficacy, or its authenticity; but will in no degree prove that it is not the only proper baſis of the law of nations. That theſe laws have in fact been eſſentially improved by the influence of the Chriſtian revelation, hiſtory itſelf will abundantly teſtify. Whatever were the virtues of the Athenians, when Pericles preſided in the ſtate, and morality was taught by Socrates; and whatever were the boaſted refinements of the Romans, when Auguſtus gave them laws, and Cicero was their inſtructor in philoſophy; ſtill in their tranſactions with foreign countries, their rules of conduct were leſs humane and equitable, than thoſe of any nation, however inferior in other reſpects, which has felt the benign

benign influence of Chriſtianity *. Whatever may have been the errors of papal ſuperſtitions; and whatever may have been in other reſpects the miſchiefs of papal uſurpations; they have been attended with one obvious good effect; the general union of the kingdoms of Europe under one ſpiritual head, contributed eſſentially to render the laws of nations amongſt them more mild and

* From many inſtances that might be adduced in proof of this aſſertion, take only the difference of their treatment of priſoners of war. Both the Greeks and Romans conſidered captives taken in battle as the abſolute property of the conqueror; on the principle, probably, that the life he had ſpared was entirely at his diſpoſal; and that he was conſequently at liberty to retain, or to ſell them, for ſlaves; to put them to death; or to diſpoſe of them in any other way, at his own diſcretion: and if theſe unfortunate men experienced any milder treatment, they were indebted for it, not to any laws in their favour, but to the juſtice, the humanity, or the policy of the individual.

In all Chriſtian countries, on the contrary, hoſtility ceaſes with reſiſtance: the lives of all who ſubmit, are ſpared upon principle; and the priſoners are ſupported by their conquerors, till they are exchanged or releaſed. At leaſt, if the captives do not always find this humanity, it ariſes, not from want of equitable regulations on the ſubject, but from the caprice or cruelty of individuals; it is not from the obſervance of law, but the violation of it.

equitable, as well as more uniform and conſiſtent. For ſome of the earlieſt and greateſt improvements in the laws of nations, we are indebted to the genius and the policy of Charlemagne; and theſe laws are brought nearly to perfection in the ſyſtem of Grotius. But both the prince and the philoſopher were indebted for their precepts to the principles of the Chriſtian religion, and depend for their obſervance on its authority. If indeed the tranſactions of policy are ever to be governed by the rules of good morals; if the diſtinctions of country are ever to be diſregarded in the exerciſe of juſtice and benevolence; and if the great republic of mankind is ever to attain to that perfection in its laws, of which it appears by nature to be capable; this ſurely can be effected only by the precepts of ſuch a revelation, as we believe to have been given; ſanctioned by that authority, from which the revelation itſelf profeſſes to be derived *.

8. Before we quit the ſubject of the pretended ſufficiency of reaſon to teach men

* See Ward on the Law of Nations.

their

their duty, and to enforce the practice of it; it is not without importance to conſider the date of the objection, which has been drawn from thence, to the neceſſity and the truth of a divine revelation. At the time of our Saviour's appearance in the world, whatever other reaſons were aſſigned for not receiving him as a teacher come from God; it was never ſuggeſted that his inſtructions were not wanted; that mankind did not ſtand in need of ſome ſuch information, as he profeſſed to communicate. Even his enemies among the Jews acknowledged, that his doctrine was ſuperior to whatever they had heard; *that never man ſpake like this man.* Amidſt all the oppoſition made to the apoſtles; amidſt all the reproach, with which they were loaded; and all the perſecution they endured; it does not appear that a divine revelation was ever conſidered as ſuperfluous and uſeleſs; the ſufficiency of human reaſon, for the purpoſes of religion and morality, was not once pleaded againſt them. *Chriſt crucified was* indeed *to the Jews a ſtumbling block, and to the Greeks fooliſhneſs*; but they did not deny the want of aſſiſtance from heaven. The objection is in fact of very mo-

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dern date; and has been inſiſted on ſolely by thoſe, whoſe own reaſon has been enlightened by the revelation they oppoſe; who were furniſhed by the religion itſelf, with the arms they would uſe for its deſtruction.

This ſeems to have ariſen from errors which, however important, are neither unnatural nor unfrequent. The fundamental truths of religion were taught us ſo early, that we cannot recollect the time when they were unknown to us; and our faculties are ſo fitted for their reception, that we fancy we were able to have diſcovered them. They are ſo adapted to our nature and ſituation, that we ſuppoſe they either are ſelf-evident, or ſo obvious that no man could overlook them. The moral precepts of the goſpel are found upon examination to be perfectly equitable in themſelves, and excellently adapted to the purpoſes of human life; and this diſcovery of their equity and aptitude, has been miſtaken for the diſcovery of the precepts themſelves. Perhaps men confound memory with invention; and do not diſtinguiſh between what they have learnt from inſtruction, and what they have attained by inveſtigation.

tigation. Perhaps, too, vanity inclines them to aſcribe to their own ſagacity, what they have been taught by revelation; and when they trace in the creation the proofs of the exiſtence and power of the Creator, whom ſcripture or tradition has announced, they fancy they have diſcovered by their own reaſon and obſervation, what their own reaſon and obſervation have only confirmed. It is one thing to perceive the truth of a propoſition when ſuggeſted to the mind; and another for the mind to ſuggeſt the propoſition to itſelf. Philoſophers both antient and modern have been able to produce many arguments in ſupport of the truths that have been revealed. They have explored, with great diligence and ſkill, the wonderful labyrinth of nature, and diſcovered many teſtimonies of the power, the wiſdom, and the goodneſs of the architect; but the clue to what they ſhould find there had been previouſly put into their hands by revelation. I preſs this point the more earneſtly; becauſe it is an error which appears to infect the minds and writings of many ingenious men; of many who deny the truth of revelation; and of ſome who believe it. It ſeems indeed to be

at leaſt one ſource of that indifference to the duties of devotion, which unhappily marks the character of the preſent times; and to have occaſioned not a few of the miſtakes and controverſies on the ſubject of natural religion.

9. It muſt be obſerved too that they who, in aſſerting the ample powers of reaſon, aſcribe to the philoſophers of antiquity ſufficient knowledge of ethics and theology, aſcribe to them what they do not claim for themſelves.

With reſpect to religion, * Plato declares, that in order to underſtand what is divine, the mind wants divine illumination; as much as, to diſcern the proper objects of viſion, the eye wants the light of the ſun; and with regard to morality, it was the opinion of Socrates †, that all attempts to reform the world would be without ſucceſs; unleſs the Deity ſhould in his mercy commiſſion a teacher to inſtruct mankind in their duty. Cicero ‡ wiſhed for a new argument

* De Repub. Lib. 6. † Plat. Apol. Socr.

‡ Tuſc. Quæſt. 5, 7.

to prove that virtue alone would conſtitute happineſs: and * Jamblichus acknowledges, that there is but one remedy for all the doubts and errors of mankind; and that is, to obtain, if poſſible, ſome portion of divine illumination. Quotations of the ſame tendency might be multiplied to almoſt any extent; but theſe are enough to exhibit philoſophy complaining of its own inſufficiency, and lamenting its own defects; diſclaiming for itſelf thoſe diſcoveries, for which zeal for an hypotheſis would give it credit; and, while it is adduced as ſuperſeding the neceſſity of a divine revelation, giving its own voluntary ſuffrage in its favour.

10. By the gainſayer of modern times it may yet be maintained, that this ſuppoſed revelation, with all its boaſted excellence in doctrines and precepts, is itſelf the invention and contrivance of human reaſon; that its rules of morality are not ſuperior to thoſe of the heathen philoſophers in a higher degree than might reaſonably be expected, from the progreſſive cultivation and improvement of

* De Myſt. 3, 18.

the human mind; and that its doctrines are by prieſtcraft and policy only rendered more ſolemn and myſterious; in order more fully to anſwer the purpoſe of ſuch inventions; that they may operate the more powerfully on the weak and timid; and the more effectually ſecure the authority of the cunning and the daring.

Upon the minds of men, who maintain ſentiments like theſe, the ſuperior excellence of the ethics and theology of the Chriſtian revelation can have little effect. Againſt them therefore we muſt urge the more deciſive argument; that reaſon could not invent the prophecies and their completion in the perſon and conduct of our Saviour; nor give the power of working miracles, in atteſtation of his doctrines, to himſelf and his apoſtles: and till the credit of theſe can be ſhaken, they will be ſufficient to prove that our religion is, what it profeſſes to be, a revelation from heaven.

11. Admitting, however, in the laſt place, what certainly can be admitted only for the ſake of argument, that the light of nature

and reaſon has in reality enabled men to diſcover all that has ever been aſcribed to it; admitting that the ſages of antiquity taught not only all the moral and ſocial duties; but alſo a rational ſyſtem of religion, and a conſiſtent and credible account of a future ſtate of retribution; ſtill their diſcoveries can come in no competition with what the goſpel has revealed. They offer no encouragement under the frailties, which all men feel; no conſolation under the ſenſe of thoſe tranſgreſſions, into which the beſt men occaſionally fall. Their ſyſtem of future reward and puniſhment could be only a ſyſtem of rigid and inflexible juſtice; and the proſpect conſequently more likely to inſpire terror than reſolution; deſpair, rather than hope.

The faireſt boaſt of the advocates of reaſon is the character and conduct of Socrates; yet his behaviour in his laſt moments affords ample proof of the imperfection of his religion. He makes no mention of the one true God; expreſſes no confidence in his goodneſs; no hope in his mercy; and does not ſeem to expect, for he does not ſolicit,

any pardon for errors or for crimes*. He felt remorſe of conſcience indeed; but it was only for not having paid due attention to the god of dreams; and therefore in obedience to his ſuppoſed directions, prepares for death, by tranſlating the fables of Eſop, and writing hymns in honour of Apollo. With his laſt breath he requeſts his friend to perform for him a ſacrifice of idolatry and ſuperſtition †.

* It is obſervable alſo, that in the dying man's addreſs to the Supreme Being, in Epictetus, there is no dejection of mind from a ſenſe of guilt, no confeſſion of error or imperfection, and conſequently no petition for pardon. But there is a great deal of confidence, oſtentation, and arrogance. Yet Epictetus was one of the beſt men of the beſt ſect of philoſophers. Vid. Epict. Diſſert. 4. 10.

† Plat. Phæd. Sub Fin. I am aware that various and widely different interpretations have been given of this celebrated injunction to Crito. But the moſt obvious ſeems the beſt. It does not appear to have been delivered by Socrates as having any hidden or myſterious meaning; or to have been ſo underſtood by his friends who heard it. Socrates always worſhipped the gods of his country in the cuſtomary forms, and exhorted his followers to do the ſame: and why ſhould we ſeek for a far-fetched interpretation of the words, when the natural and obvious ſenſe is conſiſtent with the general ſentiments and general practice of him who ſpoke them.

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In oppoſition to theſe doubtful and gloomy proſpects, the Chriſtian revelation inſtructs us to look up to the Deity, not only as a creator, but as a protector; whoſe benevolence is equal to his power; and whoſe juſtice is tempered with mercy. It teaches us, that our own exertions will be aſſiſted and ſupported in forming right opinions, and carrying them into effect and practice; and that not only the tranſgreſſions of human frailty may be finally forgiven; but that even human virtue and piety may become entitled to an everlaſting reward. For it teaches the ineſtimable doctrines of the influence of grace; the efficacy of repentance; the atonement of the death of Chriſt; and the reſurrection to happineſs and glory.

With thoſe who aſſert that the powers of reaſon are ſufficient for all the purpoſes of religion and morality, theſe doctrines of our ſcriptures may have little weight; becauſe they may obtain little attention or credit. But theſe are the points, which the advocate of Chriſtianity ſhould never ceaſe to urge; for they are the baſis of all his own beſt

hopes, and of the triumph of his religion; they are what finally eſtabliſh the excellence, the ſuperiority, and the neceſſity of a divine revelation.

SERMON

SERMON III.

ON THE PROBABILITY, INDEPENDENTLY OF THE DIRECT EVIDENCE, THAT GOD HAS REVEALED HIS WILL TO MANKIND; THAT THIS REVELATION IS THE ORIGINAL FOUNDATION OF ALL RELIGION AMONGST THEM; AND THAT THE HISTORY, THE DOCTRINES, AND THE PRECEPTS OE THIS REVELATION ARE CONTAINED IN THE OLD AND NEW TESTAMENT.

ROM. x. 17.

Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.

IN ſtating, on a former occaſion, the neceſſity of divine inſtruction, to correct the errors of the heathen philoſophers in ethics and theology; it was not intended to have it ſuppoſed, that the truths of the new teſtament were the whole of the revelation, with which mankind have been favoured by their Creator:

Creator: and when the knowledge and opinions of thoſe philoſophers were conſidered as the diſcoveries of unaſſiſted reaſon; it was by no means deſigned to have it underſtood, that this was the true ſtate of the caſe. But for the ſake of perſpicuity in the diſquiſition, the cuſtomary language was adopted; the ſubject was taken in the ordinary point of view. I ſhall now ſtate more explicitly, and endeavour to ſupport by argument, what I conceive to be truth; and what has indeed already been ſuggeſted; that all religion whatever took its riſe in the firſt inſtance from divine revelation; that not in Chriſtianity only, but in every other religious ſyſtem, *faith came originally by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.*

From our limited information reſpecting the earlier generations of mankind, and the ſcantineſs or obſcurity of ancient records, hiſtorical teſtimony, excluſive of our ſcriptures, directly and explicitly to the point, cannot perhaps be found; and from the nature of the ſubject, and as it ſhould ſeem, from the intentions of providence, ſcientific demonſtration and indiſputable certainty

cannot

cannot be obtained. But, by ſuch evidence as the caſe appears to admit, I ſhall hope to render it probable and credible; that mankind did not by the exertion of their own faculties, either in the examination of the conſtitution and courſe of nature, or in abſtract and metaphyſical reaſoning, diſcover the exiſtence and attributes of the Deity, or their own duties and obligations to him; but that they were inſtructed in theſe important points by the Creator himſelf, for their benefit and improvement; for their preſent comfort and future happineſs. I ſhall endeavour to ſhew that a divine revelation is not, as has been aſſerted, a circumſtance in its own nature ſo improbable, that ſcarce any teſtimony can render it credible; but that it is a diſpenſation of providence reaſonably to be believed; becauſe reaſonably to have been expected; and of which the probability, independently of the direct and proper evidence, is hardly leſs than the neceſſity. I ſhall endeavour to ſhew, that in all the falſe religions, which have appeared in the world, ſtrong veſtiges may yet be traced of their having been derived originally by hiſtory or tradition from the true; and,

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what is indeed not only the moſt important point, but the end and aim of all the reſt, that the only authentic records of ſuch divine revelation, of its hiſtory and its doctrines, are to be found in our ſcriptures.

Though theſe objects of the diſquiſition are in ſome reſpects diſtinct from each other, they will all be conſtantly kept in view, and purſued together; for they all tend to ſupport the ſame general concluſion, and terminate in the ſame point.

From what cauſes, and in what degree, this revelation has been perverted or neglected, denied, or diſobeyed, has been in ſome meaſure already explained *; and does not form a neceſſary part of the preſent enquiry. The foulneſs of the ſtream at a diſtance does not prove its want of tranſparency at the ſource; it proves only the impurities of the ſoil through which it has paſſed.

If then the different poſitions, that have been advanced, can be rendered credible; if

* In Sermon I.

each ſhall appear more probable than its reverſe; they will not indeed form the beſt, or alone, ſufficient ground of faith in the goſpel of Chriſt; but they will be entitled to the attention of thoſe, who diſpute or deny the direct evidence; and they may bring ſome additional conviction to thoſe who receive it.

As far too as theſe poſitions ſhall appear to be well ſupported, they will invalidate all objection to the neceſſity or the credibility of a divine revelation, from the ſuppoſed ſufficiency of natural religion. And to natural religion ſo much has been allowed, even by many diſtinguiſhed advocates of Chriſtianity, that they have furniſhed the Deiſt with ſome of his beſt arguments againſt themſelves and their cauſe *.

Before

* It would have materially narrowed the ground of controverſy with the Deiſts, had they at the outſet declared, how far in their opinion reaſon was able to go; what were her real or ſuppoſed diſcoveries; or in other words, what were the articles of their creed. This they have not explicitly done. But many Chriſtian divines ſeem to have admitted for them; that the exiſtence, the attributes,

Before we proceed, however, to the more immediate buſineſs of the preſent enquiry, it ſeems

attributes, and the providence of God; that the rules and obligations of our moral and religious duties, and the rewards and punishments of a life to come, are diſcoverable by the mere light of nature and reaſon. And in this they appear to me to have admitted, more than is conſiſtent with the intereſts of divine revelation and truth; and that for ſeveral reaſons.

1. If reaſon could have diſcovered all that is allowed; ſhe could have diſcovered all that revelation has told us; except what are uſually called its myſterious doctrines; ſuch as the influence of Grace; the divine nature of Chriſt; and the atonement by his death. Now how important ſoever theſe doctrines may be in themſelves, and how clearly ſoever we may ſuppoſe them revealed in ſcripture; it is well known that all and each of them have been controverted or denied; not only by thoſe who do not admit the truth of the Chriſtian revelation; but by many who profeſs to believe it. The Deiſt therefore is allowed by theſe conceſſions to maintain, that the Chriſtian religion has made no other addition to natural, than ſome points of *doubtful diſputation*.

2. If it be urged that our Saviour's appearance on earth was neceſſary, to confirm and to give authority to the truths, which reaſon had diſcovered ſufficient grounds to believe; it muſt be obſerved, that our Saviour's confirming or giving the authority of laws to ſuch truths, depends wholly upon his own authority's being firſt admitted; that is, upon the truth of the Chriſtian revelation. He did

ſeems neceſſary to take ſome notice of the important ſubject of natural religion; and to

did not, for example, phyſically or logically demonſtrate the reality of a future ſtate of retribution: he only declared it: and what credit is due to his declaration depends entirely upon his veracity; that is, upon the general truth of his miſſion.

3. If it be ſuppoſed that the Creator at firſt endowed men with ſuch faculties as to enable them, by the ſtudy of their own nature, and the nature of the objects around them, to diſcover, to any given extent, the rules and obligations of their duty; and that he afterwards made more immediately from himſelf, important additions and improvements; conveyed to men in a different manner, and reſting on a different foundation; we cannot perceive in this inſtance that unity of deſign and operation, which appears ſo conſpicuous in the other proceedings of the Deity. It ſhould ſeem much more probable, that the Creator would either, according to the ſentiments of the Deiſt, have endowed his creatures in the firſt inſtance with faculties ſufficient to diſcover all that it was neceſſary for them to know; or that he would, according to the hypotheſis of theſe lectures, have given a revelation as the only rule, authority, and obligation for our moral and religious duties; leaving to reaſon only the eaſier taſk of diſcovering the rectitude, the fitneſs and the utility of his laws; that we might obey them with the greater readineſs and ſatisfaction.

4. How far reaſon was able in the ſtate of innocence, or how far ſhe might be able in any ſuppoſed ſtate of improvement,

to ſtate in what ſenſe preciſely I would underſtand the terms. If by natural religion, its advocates mean all ſuch doctrines and precepts as, when once propoſed to the mind,

provement; to diſcover the rules and obligations of human duty, may amuſe as a queſtion of ſpeculation; but whether ſhe ever did, previouſly to all inſtruction, make any ſuch diſcoveries, appears to be wholly a queſtion of fact: and to thoſe, who believe our ſcriptures to be *the oracles of God*, it is obvious ſhe was not left to perform ſo difficult a taſk. The knowledge of his Creator and his duty, communicated to Adam, muſt have been tranſmitted from him, with more or leſs accuracy, to all his poſterity. See the Sermon, § 4.

5. Our divines probably have made, or been ſuppoſed to make, ſuch large conceſſions to the light of nature and reaſon, from ſome of the miſtakes enumerated in Serm. 2, § 8; and from their anxiety to eſtabliſh the conſiſtency between reaſon and revelation. Some ſuch miſtakes appear to affect the whole of *Wollaſton's Religion of Nature delineated*, of *Wilkins's Treatiſe on the principles and duties of natural religion*, and of many other works of great merit and celebrity. Even Clarke himſelf, certainly one of the moſt learned, the moſt ingenious, and the moſt candid advocates of natural religion, appears to defend it, not as what unaſſiſted reaſon did or could diſcover, but as what reaſon in her preſent ſtate, enlarged by general ſcience, and illuminated by divine revelation, that is, what the reaſon of Dr. Clarke, is able to prove to be true, and fit, and right.

right

right reaſon muſt approve; or all ſuch as are ſo agreeable to the nature of things and the nature of man, that when once known they may be ſupported or confirmed by arguments from thence; they may fairly be underſtood to mean a great part of the truths of Chriſtianity; all thoſe, at leaſt, which immediately regard morality and its ſanctions; which teach our duty to our Creator and our fellow-creatures, and our reward or puniſhment in a life to come. It is one of the peculiar excellencies of our religion, that it is adapted to our nature and ſituation; to the hopes and wiſhes of rational creatures; of thoſe for whoſe uſe it declares itſelf to have been given. The harmony between the dictates of revelation and the deductions of right reaſon, is one of the proofs that both have proceeded from the ſame beneficent author.

But if by natural religion its advocates mean a religion, which the light of nature and reaſon alone could have diſcovered, or did actually diſcover; they maintain what appears much leſs capable of being ſupported by adequate proof; and what it is one pur-

poſe of the preſent diſquiſition to oppoſe. In this latter ſenſe, however, natural religion ſeems to have been underſtood and defended, by ſome of the ableſt advocates of revelation; by men whoſe names are deſervedly ranked with the moſt illuſtrious in our theology. The arguments, therefore, in favour of a different hypotheſis, will be offered with all the diffidence, which ſuch opponents muſt naturally inſpire; and with ſuch reſpect for their ſentiments, as their talents and their celebrity ſo juſtly demand. Were the point to be decided by authority, however, names of not much leſs celebrity might be brought forward in favour of the theory intended to be maintained; and in ſupport of which the arguments ſhall now be produced.

1. The probability of a divine revelation, it is obvious, would be beſt ſupported by examining and vindicating the nature and the hiſtory of that which we receive as ſuch. It would appear moſt credible, from a ſtatement of its direct evidence; from a diſplay of the value, the wiſdom, and the coincidence of the ſucceſſive communications that

have been made to mankind by Adam, and by the patriarchs and prophets, by Moſes, and by Jeſus Chriſt. We ſhould find our faith beſt confirmed, by conſidering the variety, the ſeries, and the application of the prophecies; the number, the nature, and the teſtimony of the miracles; and the utility, the ſuperiority, and the ſanctions of the moral precepts of the goſpel. It is one of the firſt duties of the advocate of Chriſtianity, to ſhew that it is every way worthy of the Deity, from whom it declares itſelf to be derived; that all its means and inſtruments are wiſely adapted to their reſpective ends and purpoſes; that its commands and prohibitions, threats and promiſes, are reconcileable to the attributes, which it aſcribes to their author; that its narratives ſuitably illuſtrate what they profeſs, the perfections and providence of God; and, in ſhort, to clear the difficulties, and anſwer the objections that have been urged againſt it; whether they reſpect its doctrines or its precepts, its evidence, or its records. But theſe points muſt be left to thoſe who undertake to diſcuſs them. The deſign here is to conſider, what probability of a divine

revelation, as a reality in itſelf, and as the original ſource of all religion, can be found in the acknowledged attributes of the Deity; in the conſtitution and courſe of nature; and in the antient hiſtory or preſent ſituation of mankind: or in other words, what marks of credibility, internal or external, appear in favour of our ſcriptures, without previouſly admitting their authenticity.

2. If a divine revelation be probable in itſelf; it is probably the original ſource of all religion: and a divine revelation is itſelf probable, in the firſt place, from the very notion of a Creator and his eſſential attributes. I do not here enter into any metaphyſical diſquiſition on the nature and perfections of the Deity; but I take his benevolence for granted; becauſe it is not eaſy to conceive the exiſtence of his other acknowledged attributes, if this be excluded: there cannot be perfection without it. I take his benevolence for granted; becauſe omniſcience cannot err in the proſecution of its purpoſes; and omnipotence can have no temptation to deſire, or to do, what is not merciful and good; and becauſe it is not credible

credible that any other motive could induce the Almighty to create mankind, than to communicate happineſs. To have created them for any other purpoſe would imply weakneſs or malevolence; weakneſs, that was unable, or malevolence, that was unwilling, to confer happineſs on his creatures; both which are in their own nature defects or imperfections; and therefore incompatible with all our ideas of a ſelf-exiſtent perfect Being.

The ſame benevolence then, which induced the Deity to create mankind, we can have no doubt, would induce him to communicate to them ſuch information and inſtruction, as their nature and ſituation required; to give them ſuch a revelation, as would lead them to thoſe enjoyments, for which he muſt have deſigned them. It is here indeed that all the value, and all the neceſſity, of a divine revelation, which have been already ſtated, might be again adduced in ſupport of its probability. Whatever proves it to have been wanted, will prove that it has probably been given. It is inconſiſtent with every ſentiment we enter-

tain of a Creator, to ſuppoſe he would give exiſtence to a world, and not provide for its well-being; and above all, that he would leave the moſt exalted of his creatures upon it in a worſe ſituation than the reſt; without an object adequate to the capacities, with which he has endowed them; with a poſſibility of ſuffering the moſt exquiſite miſery; and without a correſponding poſſibility of attaining conſummate enjoyment. But on the contrary, nothing can be, to our apprehenſion, more equitable, than that the Creator ſhould give laws to his own creation; nothing more ſuitable to his perfections; than to do what was ſo neceſſary to be done. Thus far then does natural probability ſupport the credit of what we conceive to be a divine revelation; and the narratives of ſcripture are conſiſtent with what our own deductions would teach us to expect.

3. It is in the next place probable that all religion was derived originally from divine revelation; becauſe no other probable origin can be aſſigned. It may be maintained, with great appearance of truth, that man could not from the light of nature, or by any exertion

ertion of his own faculties, ever have obtained the idea of a Creator and a God. That nature has not impreſſed any diſtinct notions upon the human mind; that we have not any ideas innate and unborrowed; is now admitted by our ableſt philoſophers. It is admitted too, that all the ideas we actually poſſeſs, were either received immediately by the ſenſes, or have been obtained by the recollection, or the compariſon, by the combination, or the diviſion of ſuch as the ſenſes have conveyed to us. The mind may vary its ideas beyond any known limits; but cannot create them: it cannot ſuggeſt them to itſelf. If then inſtruction be excluded, all the ideas we can acquire, will be ideas of material and ſenſible objects alone; and theſe can by no combination or diviſion form the idea of a Being immaterial and ſpiritual. And if they could not furniſh the primary and fundamenal notion of the exiſtence of a God; much leſs could they teach the complicated doctrines of creation and providence; of our obligations and dependence; of worſhip, obedience and reſponſibility. Were this conſideration purſued to its utmoſt extent, and ſtated in its full force, it would

not perhaps be eaſily refuted. But not to dwell on what may be thought abſtruſe and metaphyſical; there is one part of it more connected with facts, and more obvious to common apprehenſion.

In the ſuppoſition that all our ideas of God and religion are of human invention, human power of invention ſeems to be over-rated. Human inventions do not appear ever to have been original diſcoveries; diſcoveries of ideas, arts or ſciences, totally new, totally different from any thing known before; but improvements of what nature had already begun; applications of the ſame materials to other purpoſes; from inveſtigations obviouſly ſuggeſted and prompted by objects of ſenſe. One of the nobleſt of human acquiſitions, for example, is the art of navigation; yet its progreſs to its preſent excellence may be plauſibly and probably traced, from the tree thrown by the tempeſt into the river, and floating down the ſtream. Another of our moſt valuable diſcoveries is confeſſedly the art of printing: yet this ſeems to have been no great difficulty, when impreſſions of every ordinary object had been obſerved

obſerved in the clay or the ſand. Whether an alphabet was the gift of divine wiſdom, or the invention of human genius; when once men had agreed upon the uſe and meaning of arbitrary ſigns, the wonder ſeems to be, not that the art of printing was diſcovered at all, but that it was not diſcovered at a much earlier period of the world*.

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* On theſe points one of the moſt natural, becauſe moſt important enquiries, is; whence did men firſt learn to ſow and plant, and above all, to convert grain into bread. In favour of our general hypotheſis we might ſuppoſe the Creator to have taught theſe arts to the original progenitors of mankind; nor is the ſuppoſition without probability in itſelf, or countenance from ſcripture. Whatever arts were indiſpenſably neceſſary to the ſupport of human life, muſt have been immediately taught to thoſe, who could not otherwiſe ſufficiently early have obtained a knowledge of them: and if, according to our ſcriptures, Adam was placed in paradiſe, *to keep it, and to dreſs it*, it is obvious, he muſt have been inſtructed, ſo as to be enabled to perform the taſk required.

But if we ſuppoſe theſe arts to be of human invention, the diſcovery does not appear to have required more ſagacity than has been exerted on other occaſions. While the human race conſiſted but of a ſmall number in a favourable climate; ſuppoſing with our ſcriptures, that they ever exiſted under ſuch circumſtances; it is certainly poſſible they might ſubſiſt upon fruits alone. No great degree of attention

Were the whole of our arts and ſciences to be carefully examined, it would be found, that they have all been reared from ſmall

attention was required to obſerve, that the ſeeds of vegetables dropped upon the ground, and that other vegetables of the ſame kind ſprang up in their place; and not greater reflection to conſider, that this proceſs might be turned to advantage by human induſtry and ſkill. When once it was known, by whatever means, whether inſpiration or experiment, that farinacious grains were nutritious; it ſeems by no means improbable, that the conſtant deſire to render them more uſeful, more ſalubrious, or more palatable, ſhould in time lead to the complex proceſs which now takes place in the production of bread from grain. In theſe, however, and moſt other uſeful arts, the fact ſeems to be, that providence placed the materials before us, and endowed us with faculties to employ them. He gave the grain and the grape; and implanted in us inſtincts to prompt us to make experiments, and ſagacity to conduct them. But how far it might be neceſſary to inſtruct our firſt parents for their immediate ſubſiſtence and comfort; or how far individuals may have been ſince endowed with ſuperior talents, for the ſake of making ſuch improvements, as would not have been made by men of ordinary abilities; where the immediate inſtruction of the Creator ceaſes, and the effects of exertions merely human take place; this is a point which may for ever be diſputed, becauſe it cannot be preciſely aſcertained; probabilities only can be adduced on either ſide of the queſtion; and the perſevering controvertiſt, therefore, never can be ſilenced,

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beginnings, and advanced to their preſent ſtate by ſuch gradual or accidental improvements, as have with ſome licence of language been denominated inventions and diſcoveries. But by whatever names they have been diſtinguiſhed, and whatever may have been their merit and utility, they have all been ſuggeſted by objects of ſenſe; and have led to ideas and opinions of ſenſible objects alone: they cannot be ſhewn to have ever ſuggeſted the notion of ſpirit; of a being, whoſe nature and qualities are different and oppoſite to all that we have ſeen and known; of a Deity, a Creator, and a providence.

This theory may be in ſome degree ſupported by an appeal to facts. The philoſophers of antiquity were not led by their ſpeculations to any ſuch concluſions. From contemplating the courſe of nature and its regularity; that nothing new is produced, that nothing old is loſt; that objects only decay and revive; they were led to infer, and with ſome appearance of reaſon, the eternity of matter; they did not diſcover, and they did not believe, the exiſtence of ſpirit,

rit*. In all their diſquiſitions the human ſoul, and the Gods themſelves, are conſi-

* In the various notices or diſquiſitions, which occur in the witings of Cicero, on the nature of the human ſoul, he never appears to ſuppoſe it to be pure ſpirit. It is every where conſidered as air, or fire, or æther, or ſome other matter, however ſubtle or unknown: and the ſame obſervation may be made with reſpect to his notions of the Gods. He has made Cotta ſay, what he himſelf appears to have thought, Nihil eſt quod vacet corpore. Nat. Deor. 1. 23. Were the writings of all the antient philoſophers examined on the ſame point, the ſame obſervation would, I think, be the reſult; though ſome very diſtinguiſhed writers of our own country are of a different opinion; particularly with reſpect to Plato. I have, however, generally conſidered what is ſaid by Cicero as ſufficiently repreſenting the ſentiments of all the reſt. His ſagacity and powers of reaſoning were not inferior to thoſe of any Greek or Roman author that went before him. He had the aſſiſtance of all their writings; and had ſtudied them with great diligence. He has on ſome occaſion or other ſtated what were, on moſt of the great queſtions amongſt them, the opinions of all the principal ſects of their philoſophers; and his ſtatements appear to be both candid and perſpicuous; and he was the laſt philoſopher of ſuch eminence before the birth of Chriſt. What he, therefore, has not ſaid, may fairly be conſidered, either as not then known, or not thought worthy of notice. What Cicero did not diſcover, in religion and morality, may ſurely be conſidered as beyond the reach of human reaſon. This, I hope, will be a ſufficient apology for my referring to him ſo much more frequently, than to any other author.

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dered as material. Their beſt idea of creation, wherever they obtained it, was only to reduce confuſion into order, to form a world from a chaos; and the employment of the Supreme Being, according to their moſt exalted notions of it, was either, as an agent ſeparate and diſtinct, to arrange the univerſe, and preſerve the arrangement; or as an eſſential part of the whole, as the ſoul of the world itſelf, to give it animation and activity; to guide and govern its operations. To argue from the properties of matter to the exiſtence of ſpirit; or to ſuppoſe that ſomething was formed from nothing; was a ſtep in reaſoning, to which their philoſophy was not equal. It is indeed a gulph in logic; which the human underſtanding does not ſeem able to paſs. The fact is diſcoverable only by inſtruction; it is credible only upon teſtimony; intelligible only where the attributes of the Deity are already acknowledged.

4. The probability that ſome divine revelation has been given, may be yet further ſupported by conſidering, that the conſtitution of human nature and the condition of

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human life have always been ſuch, as to ſtand much in need of information; and yet that moſt of the information required can be obtained only by inſtruction. Our inſtincts are fewer and weaker than thoſe of moſt other animals; leſs certain in their operations, and leſs valuable in their effects. We do not, like them, intuitively diſtinguiſh what is uſeful from what is noxious; what is dangerous from what is ſafe. We do not know food from poiſon; the animal intended for our ſubſiſtence, from the beaſt of prey that would deſtroy us. We are not able for many years to provide for our own ſubſiſtence; and ſtill leſs for our defence and protection. From hence will follow concluſions of very material importance.

It will follow that man was created in a ſtate of maturity; becauſe had he not been ſo created, he never could have reached it. By no efforts of his own could he ever have been reared from infancy to manhood. It will follow too, that ſuch inſtruction muſt have been given to him, as was neceſſary to his nature and ſituation. For without it he muſt have periſhed, long before he could have

have made ſuch obſervations and experiments, as were requiſite for his ſubſiſtence and preſervation; and to ſuch inſtruction accordingly our endowments are adapted. Inſtead of inſtincts alone; which obtain of themſelves all the objects they are permitted to obtain, and can be aſſiſted only to a fixed and very limited extent; we are endued alſo with the nobler faculty of reaſon; which is capable of receiving inſtruction beyond any known limits; and of profiting by what it has received. As inſtruction muſt have been at firſt the principal ſource of information, ſo does it continue. The greateſt part of our knowledge is obtained from others, during the years of infancy and youth; and no man has powers, even if life allowed him time, to attain by his own efforts as much as it is neceſſary for him to know; as much as is required, perhaps to his ſubſiſting at all, and certainly to his ſubſiſting with that comfort and enjoyment; of which his Creator has given him both the capacity and the deſire. We are not, therefore, more inclined by nature, than impelled by neceſſity, to unite in ſociety for mutual information and mutual ſupport. What we know was in a great

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degree received from others; and they in their turn received it from thoſe who went before them. Each ſucceſſive generation has made but a ſmall addition to the ſcience of its predeceſſors. Thus the greateſt part of the arts and the philoſophy of the Weſtern nations may be traced backwards to Italy; from Italy to Greece; and from Greece to Egypt and the Eaſt. Of individual philoſophers too, each has found inſtructors in ſuch as had purſued the ſame ſtudies before him. Cicero was greatly indebted to Plato; Plato to Socrates; Socrates to Anexagoras and Archelaus; and they to others; till we reach much more nearly than could have been expected, if the nature of ancient records be conſidered, to the time, the places, and the perſons; to whom, as our ſcriptures inform us, the divine communications were made.

Theſe communications muſt at firſt have extended, not only to the religious and moral duties of man, but to his ſubſiſtence and preſervation. And to what was at firſt given from heaven, we were intended, and have been prompted, to make continual additions; by

by our natural love of knowledge, and capacity of improvement; by the native activity of our faculties; and the neceſſities of our ſituation. But divine information appears to have been the ſeed, however ſmall, from which ſprung the abundant harveſt of ſcience, which we now enjoy; it was the original ray, however feeble, which has ſince blazed, as a meridian ſun, and illuminated every civilized nation of the world. The ſuppoſition then of a divine revelation correſponds equally with the declarations of ſcripture, and the faculties of man; with natural probability, and the records of general hiſtory. It accounts fairly too, for what could not otherwiſe be ſo ſatisfactorily accounted for; that knowledge in religion appears to be at leaſt as antient, as ſkill in the moſt ſimple ſciences; that the former has often been the beſt ſource of the latter; and at leaſt a collateral and auxiliary ſtream through every nation and every age.

5. That a divine revelation was given to the original progenitors of our ſpecies, may again be conſidered as probable; becauſe no other probable era can be aſſigned for the

commencement of religion amongſt mankind. If religion was the diſcovery of reaſon; it may naturally be enquired, in what country and in what period of the world, ſo important a diſcovery was made; and a ſatisfactory anſwer will not eaſily be found. The human mind, with its utmoſt efforts, advances but ſlowly in abſtract ſpeculations. They are generally one of the laſt ſtudies, in which it becomes faſhionable in any country to engage; at leaſt they are among the laſt, which in the moſt improved ſtate of our faculties, are proſecuted with advantage and ſucceſs. On the ſuppoſition, therefore, that no divine revelation has been given; the moſt natural concluſion is, that many centuries muſt have elapſed before mankind had any religion at all; that ſome nations would yet be found, by whom it had not been received; or amongſt whom it was ſtill in its infancy; and that thoſe, which have formed the moſt regular ſyſtem of faith and worſhip, would retain ſome remembrance or record of its commencement, its progreſs, and its completion. But with this concluſion acknowledged facts by no means correſpond. If we examine the hiſtories of nations upwards

wards to their earlieſt periods, we ſtill find they had a religion. In the decrees of their ſenates, in the ſpeculations of their philoſophers, or in the ſuperſtitions of the people, are found indiſputable traces of this religion; not only as exiſting, but as having been long eſtabliſhed. We find a belief in divinities and their attributes and actions, not as recently diſcovered, but as always profeſſed; not in its infancy, or of any aſſignable date; but extending upwards beyond their memory or calculation; as the religion of any given period; becauſe it had been the religion of their anceſtors. Of theſe circumſtances what other conſiſtent account can be given, but that religion is the offspring of divine revelation; and, as the cauſe muſt have been before the effect, that this revelation is coeval with the origin of mankind.

6. The probability of this revelation may be yet further maintained, from many other points of the coincidence of profane, with ſacred, hiſtory; and of the phenomena of nature, with the narratives of ſcripture. The univerſal migrations of mankind from Eaſt to Weſt, in which antient hiſtory and

preſent appearances ſo remarkably agree, clearly point out Aſia as the cradle of the human race; they render it credible and probable that our original anceſtors reſided where Moſes has placed them. Nor muſt we overlook the obvious and ſtriking reſemblance between the cuſtoms and manners, the doctrine and diſcipline of the ancient Jews, and thoſe of the oriental nations in our own times; which modern enquirers have with ſo much diligence and ability examined and aſcertained. It cannot be otherwiſe accounted for, than by ſuppoſing both to be derived from one common origin; to be kindred branches of the ſame parent ſtock.

The philoſophical and phyſical enquiries into the preſent ſtructure and circumſtances of the earth; into the ſituation of its ſtrata and its minerals, its mountains and its lakes; all tend to ſhew that it muſt have undergone ſuch changes, as might reaſonably be expected from the effects of the deluge recorded in our ſcriptures. The ſtudies of the naturaliſt furniſh a teſtimony in favour of the veracity of the ſacred hiſtorians.

The late periods at which many parts of the globe appear to have been peopled; the ſtate in which we yet find commerce and colonization; and the preſent numbers of the human race, are ſtrong indications of the novelty of the world; they form at leaſt a preſumptive proof, that the date of the creation is ſuch, as the Jewiſh lawgiver has aſſigned. The extravagant pretenſions of the Indians and the Chineſe, to an almoſt immeaſureable antiquity, are now refuted and exploded; and no authentic records carry us back beyond the chronology of ſcripture.

But perhaps the preſent ſtate, and the continual improvement of arts and ſciences bear the ſtrongeſt collateral teſtimony in favour of the authority of ſacred writ. There are no reaſonable grounds to ſuppoſe them of greater antiquity than the accounts in our bible would make them. It is true, indeed, that we can know little of the acquiſitions and the ſciences of former ages, but what hiſtory has told us; and hiſtory was not likely to be written, till a conſiderable progreſs had been made in the more neceſſary arts of life. It does not follow, therefore,

that what hiſtory does not record, did not exiſt; that what is in our accounts the moſt antient, was therefore the firſt. But this is oppoſing a mere poſſibility to our beſt information; and it is of peculiar importance to obſerve, that our hiſtories not only record the gradual advances of mankind, from comparative ignorance and barbariſm to ſcience and civilization; but carry us back to the time, when moſt of the arts of life were in their infancy; when their progreſs and improvement had been ſo ſmall, that they could not be ſuppoſed older than they are repreſented. Profane hiſtory does not furniſh an example of ſuch progreſs in any art, as is incompatible with the date, which our ſcriptures aſſign for the origin of mankind.

The ſimilarity of languages to each other; their reſemblance in their alphabets, in the numbers and forms of their characters, and in all the technical detail of grammar and conſtruction, ſeems preſumptive evidence, that all were derived from one common origin: and where ſhall we look for this origin, but in the divine communications? It is readily allowed, that this ſimilarity is

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not ſufficiently ſtriking and univerſal, to be conſidered as concluſive teſtimony, that all have ſprung from the ſame root. But when we reflect, through how many nations and how many ages they have been tranſmitted; how frequently they have been mixed or divided; in what imperfect records they have been preſerved; how often and how incorrectly they have been copied; how continually the faſhionable character in every country is new-modelled; and by how many arts and accidents all are improved, corrupted, or defaced; we ſhall not be diſpoſed to regard even a diſtant reſemblance as of no weight or value; and we are here contending for preſumptive, not poſitive, proof; for probability, not demonſtration. To this too we muſt add, that no nation can produce any indiſputable claim to the invention of letters; and that all written language can be traced with hiſtorical probability to the ſame original; to the language of the people, to whom our ſcriptures aſſure us, the Deity vouchſafed his firſt and greateſt communications.

The ſuppoſition that language is of divine original will be further ſupported by conſidering, how probable it is, that the firſt ſeries of articulate ſounds muſt have been learned by inſtruction or inſpiration from heaven. It has been plauſibly maintained, that we could not even think and reflect without a language. Words paſs in the mind as the repreſentatives of things; at leaſt of things not ſeen; and without words therefore, if we were able to reaſon at all, it could only be on a ſmall number of objects, and to a very limited extent. Man could hardly be conſidered as rational. But not to entangle ourſelves in metaphyſical ſubtleties; let us conſider that there is no exiſting language, known to be the language of nature; and that all articulate ſounds were formed by art, and are acquired by imitation. Each generation of men learned their language from thoſe that went immediately before them; and purſue the idea backwards, as far as we pleaſe, we muſt come at laſt to him who ſpoke it firſt; and how he attained it, will then be a queſtion, to which no rational anſwer can be given; but that he received it,

it, with other endowments, from the bounty of his Creator.

If, again, language be a human invention; it may be aſked, in what age and in what country was it invented? In every nation, from the earlieſt period to which either their own or foreign hiſtory will carry us, we find a language exiſting and eſtabliſhed; and that, not as a wonder or a novelty; not as a recent diſcovery of their own; or as a recent importation from any other country; but as having been always in their poſſeſſion; of which they know not the ſource or the beginning. Of the formation, or the improvement, of a particular alphabet we have heard; but no hiſtory has recorded, and but a few daring theoriſts have attempted to maintain, that there ever was a time, when men did not utter articulate ſounds; or when they firſt began to utter them.

Let it be conſidered again how improbable it is, that man in a ſavage ſtate ſhould contrive and compleat ſo ingenious and complicated a device as language. When men poſſeſſed hardly any means of deliberation,

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of communicating their ſentiments to each other; ſuppoſing that they once exiſted in ſuch a ſtate; how were they to agree upon the uſe and meaning of arbitrary ſigns and ſounds? and what length of time would have been ſufficient to ſettle and fix a language? Without the uſe of language, how was a language to be formed?

Not only the difficulty of the invention, however, but its excellence and utility alſo, are preſumptive evidence that it is of divine original. It is very rationally ſuppoſed, that when the Creator gave reaſon to man, he would inſtruct him in the art, from which the gift acquires its greateſt value; that when he granted to him ſo many endowments, above thoſe granted to other animals, he would not omit that, by which his ſuperiority is beſt aſſerted and maintained; that when he formed him for ſociety *, he would

* As in theſe lectures I every where take it for granted, or aſſume it as an acknowledged truth; and argue from it as ſuch; that man was by his Creator intended and fitted for ſociety; I ſhall ſtate once for all, as conciſely as poſſible, the principal reaſons on which the aſſumption is founded;

would beſtow that, without which ſociety hardly could ſubſiſt. Auguſtus confeſſed that he could not add to his own language one new word; and Hobbes admits, that God inſtructed Adam in the uſe of ſpeech. Thus do we every where arrive at the ſame concluſion; the probability of divine inſtruction, or divine revelation; that the firſt man was enabled, as repreſented in our ſcriptures, not only to call every creature by its appropriate appellation; but to expreſs, and to convey to his poſterity, the knowledge which he had received from his Creator.

founded; and which appear to me equally obvious and unanſwerable.

1. The mutual attachment of the ſexes; which immediately conſtitutes ſociety. 2. The affection of parents for their offspring; which tends ſo ſtrongly to continue it. 3. The great and laſting neceſſity of aſſiſtance to infants; without which they muſt all inevitably periſh. 4. The univerſal proneneſs to imitation in children. 5. Their capacity of improvement by inſtruction and example. 6. The uſe of language; by which mutual information is communicated with ſuch facility and effect. 7. The helpleſſneſs and probable miſery of ſolitude. 8. All the advantages of civilization. 9. All the benefits of mutual aſſiſtance; and all the acquiſitions of combined efforts. 10. All the ſocial affections and ſocial virtues. 11. And almoſt all the qualities and propenſities of our nature.

7. Ano-

7. Another argument for the probability of revelation may be found, in the univerſal belief of the divine interference in human affairs; of the reality of miracles and of prophecy. If the courſe of nature exhibit no remarkable deviation from her own laws; if human life furniſh no inſtances of future events foretold at an immenſe diſtance of time and place; of predictions delivered and accompliſhed without fraud or colluſion; whence ſhall we ſuppoſe mankind derived their notions and their belief of things ſo improbable and inexplicable? How ſhall we account for the omens and oracles of antiquity? for the judicial aſtrology of more modern times? for the credulity of the populace reſpecting the viſible agency of ſuperior beings, and the prophetic impoſtors of the preſent day? If this be aſcribed to the contrivances of the intereſted and the artful on one hand, and on the other, to the love of the marvellous in the weak and illiterate; it is ſufficient to obſerve, that this accounts only for its uſe at preſent, not for its original production; that impoſtors do not advance pretenſions irreconcileable to all that was known before; but in order to obtain the eaſier credit,

credit, always imitate what once really exiſted, or was ſuppoſed to exiſt; and that the weak and ignorant are fond of the marvellous, only while they believe at leaſt its poſſibility. The opinion in queſtion is found in the earlieſt records of every nation; and till a more probable origin can be aſſigned for ideas equally extraordinary and univerſal, let us be allowed to aſcribe them to tradition from our primitive anceſtors; or to ſome imperfect acquaintance with the tranſactions and the hiſtory of revelation. Divine truth has been the moſt copious ſource of fable.

It has indeed been often urged, that the pretenſions to preternatural authority, to miracles and to divination, in Moſes and the prophets themſelves, are ſuch only, or nearly ſuch, as have been advanced in almoſt all ages and nations; and may therefore moſt reaſonably be ranked with other fabulous and unfounded claims. Impoſture, it cannot be denied, has been ſo frequently and boldly attempted, that our minds may naturally become cautious and ſuſpicious; and that it will require an effort of the underſtanding, which a ſuperficial enquirer may not be diſ-

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poſed to make, to ſuppoſe that there can be truth and authenticity, at the bottom of the general maſs of forgery and fiction. Not to inſiſt at preſent, however, on the ſuperiority of the claims of the prophets of our ſcriptures; it ſeems not unreaſonable to infer, from the frequency of theſe pretenſions, that divine interpoſition, miracles and prophecy once were real. Impoſtors were not likely to invent ſuch a ſyſtem; but very likely to adopt and convert it to their own advantage. The ſimiliarity in ſuch a number of copies tends to prove their deſcent from the ſame original; and this original will not eaſily be found, but in the truths and facts of revelation and ſcripture. Though ſeveral erroneous theories of the ſolar ſyſtem have been publiſhed and believed; the theory of Newton is not therefore erroneous like the reſt. Inveſtigation proves it to be true.

8. In another opinion, at no great diſtance from that which we have juſt conſidered, may be found perhaps a further probability of divine revelation; in the opinion, which moſt nations have entertained of their own origin, and of the origin of authority among them. It is well known that the idle

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vanity of individuals in magnifying the rank, fortune, and virtues of their families, extends in its full force to the conduct of nations: and that neither the one nor the other, in their endeavours to gratify the paſſion, will take much pains to diſcover truth; or to adhere to it when known. It has been ſuppoſed to be from this motive alone, that ſo many nations, and ſome diſtinguiſhed individuals, have perſuaded themſelves, or at leaſt endeavoured to perſuade others, that they were originally deſcended from their gods; that their anceſtors, according to their reſpective ſuperſtitions, were the ſons of Jupiter; the deſcendants of the great ſpirit; or the children of the ſun. But let the point be thoroughly inveſtigated, and this puerile vanity will by no means appear, under all the circumſtances of the caſe, a ſufficient cauſe for the effects it is ſuppoſed to have produced. Nations could not have affected to be the deſcendants of their gods, till themſelves and others believed that ſuch gods exiſted; and unleſs they were taught it, whence ſhall we ſuppoſe they obtained the notion, that immortal beings were the parents of a mortal offſpring; that the ſons

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of gods were only men. But there is no difficulty in the caſe, if we admit that they retained ſome imperfect tradition of the truth; of the creation of our firſt parents by the Almighty; that God had *made man in his own image.*

That this was the true ſource of the opinion in queſtion receives material confirmation from what may almoſt be conſidered as one of its branches; the opinion entertained by moſt nations of the origin of civil power. Almoſt every where we find that power has been derived from patriarchal authority, and patriarchal authority from the ſuppoſed appointment of heaven. Whatever may be maintained or determined reſpecting the actual origin, or the genuine rights, of civil government; it appears to be true in point of fact, that religion and law have generally been united; ſomething of the uſual alliance between church and ſtate every where eſtabliſhed: the latter ſupporting, by the real or pretended ſanction of the former, ſometimes indeed its particular forms; but more frequently and more reaſonably its general claim to authority; its right to demand

mand the ſubmiſſion and obedience of individuals; to enforce whatever promiſes effectually to preſerve the tranquillity and advantages of ſocial life. This union is found too in nations not ſufficiently improved to enter into deep and ſubtle contrivances, for the purpoſes of policy and power. To what then ſhall this be aſcribed, but to tradition and imitation of what our ſcriptures teach us to believe; of the protection and inſtruction beſtowed by the Creator upon the earlieſt generations of mankind; and in a peculiar manner exerted afterwards in the theocracy of the Jews.

9. It is probable again that a revelation from heaven is the original ſource of all religion; becauſe while nations the leaſt removed from what has been called a ſtate of nature, the leaſt advanced in arts and ſciences, are found to poſſeſs a religion; it is hardly credible they ſhould have invented it for themſelves. Nations, that ſubſiſt by the chaſe, have little leiſure, and appear to have as little inclination, for ſpeculative ſtudies. They are wholly engaged in providing for the day that is paſſing over them;

in guarding their own ſafety, or annoying an enemy; and when this is effected, their only wiſh is feaſting or repoſe. Were the ſavage to ſpeculate, he muſt conclude; but the probability is, that he does not ſpeculate at all. Curioſity is the offspring of a cultivated mind; and its gratification, the employment of eaſe and leiſure. When we, who are accuſtomed to reflection, behold any extraordinary work; our thoughts make an immediate tranſition to the means, by which it muſt have been performed: from contemplating the effect, we naturally proceed to conſider the cauſe. But the faculties of the ſavage ſeem dormant by diſuſe; and are ſeldom exerted but at the call of imperious neceſſity. If not preſſed by hunger, or alarmed by his enemy, he gazes with the ſame ſtupid indifference on the ſtream that flows at his feet, or the mountain that riſes to the clouds; on the growth of a vegetable, or the revolutions of the ſun. "In him reaſon differs little from the improvident inſtinct of animals, or the thoughtleſs levity of children." He will cut down the tree, to obtain the fruit of the preſent year, without any conſideration how

future

future years are to be ſupplied. At the approach of ſummer he will ſuffer his hut to decay, or to be deſtroyed; without once reflecting how ſoon winter muſt return; nor do his own repeated experience and ſufferings render him wiſer or more provident. If then ſavages are thus thoughtleſs, where their own neceſſities ſhould compel them to think; if their minds will reaſon ſo little, on what is daily forced upon their ſenſes; it will not be expected, they ſhould either be able or inclined to engage in any curious ſpeculations on the diſtinctions of right and wrong; on the rules and motives of virtue and vice. Still leſs can it be ſuppoſed, that they ſhould have been ſo attentive to the operations of nature, as to have drawn from them any inferences reſpecting the exiſtence and attributes of a Creator; and leaſt of all, that they ſhould have proceeded to proofs of the moral government of God; and the belief of rewards and puniſhments diſpenſed by him, here or hereafter, according to their merits or their crimes.

10. Still, however, our beſt accounts aſſure us, that the ſavages are not without

ſome imperfect notions on theſe difficult and important points. To the univerſality of theſe notions, indeed, exceptions, among ſome of the moſt barbarous nations, have been ſuppoſed to be found. But they are ſo few in number, and ſo doubtful as to their reality, that they do not ſeem ſufficient to break the chain of general argument, or to affect the general concluſion. It has indeed, on the contrary, been maintained, that the belief of a Supreme Being is ſo univerſal, it muſt be natural and innate; impreſſed upon the human mind by him who formed the mind itſelf; and the conſent of all nations has been immemorially urged, as a proof of the exiſtence of a Creator and a God. The great queſtion is, whence did thoſe, who have a religion, obtain it? and the moſt probable anſwer is, from tradition and revelation. That it was ſo obtained is probable, not only becauſe we cannot well conceive from what other ſource it could be drawn; but becauſe it ſtill exhibits ſome veſtiges of its divine original. The ſavages have ceremonies, of which they do not appear to know any rational uſe or meaning; and doctrines, of which they cannot aſſign

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the author or the proof; and it ſhould ſeem therefore, that they are continued not ſo much from choice, as from cuſtom; not from conviction, but authority. The probability is, that their religion reached its preſent form, not by progreſſion, but by degeneracy; that they have not improved, but corrupted it; that it was brought along with them from their parent ſtate; and, for want of records, writing and literature, has been debaſed by ſuch interpretations, changes, and additions, as would naturally be made by ignorance, negligence, or ſuperſtition.

A yet ſtronger proof, becauſe a ſtronger veſtige, of the true origin of the religions of ſavage nations, is to be found in the reſemblance they bear to each other, and even to the truths of our ſcriptures. A ſimilarity in the ordinary occupations of life between nations in ſimilar circumſtances, might be ſuppoſed not to ariſe from any communication between them; but to be the natural effect of their ſituation. The ſame wants are every where ſupplied much in the ſame way; and the ſame objects and paſſions will produce every where much the ſame ſenti-

ments and exertions. The fiſherman, whether on the Indus or the Ohio, muſt have recourſe to ſimilar expedients in purſuit of his prey; and the hunter of the new world muſt ſubſiſt, much in the ſame manner as the hunter of the antient continent. But if in opinions remote from objects of ſenſe, and little connected with the acquiſition of ſubſiſtence; if in cuſtoms of arbitrary inſtitution, and not directly ſuggeſted by the paſſions; if in theſe we find any conſiderable reſemblance; it may fairly be preſumed, that they are derived either the one from the other, or both from ſome common origin. And ſuch reſemblance appears to be diſcernible in the religious tenets and religious ceremonies of almoſt all ages and nations, whether barbarous or civilized; whether preſerved in the records of antient hiſtory, or diſcovered by the reſearches of our own times. It has been traced between the doctrines of Zoroaſter, and the inſtitutions of Moſes; between the ſages of Greece, and the ſavages of America; between the Druids of our own iſland, and the Bramins of Indoſtan. Almoſt all nations entertain the notion of a Supreme Being; not only the maker,

maker, but the governor of the univerſe; who approves and will reward merit, and condemns and will puniſh crimes; who, when offended, may be appeaſed, and his favour recovered, by certain acts of worſhip, penitence, and compenſation. Almoſt all again, however diſtant from each other in ſituation or ſcience, have ſuppoſed the Supreme Being to have his train of miniſtering ſpirits; by whoſe agency not only his own dignity is ſupported, and his commands in general performed; but by whom he holds an intercourſe with mankind; by whom he has revealed his will, and inflicts his chaſtiſements, or beſtows his bleſſings. They have all too ſome idea that they ſhall not be annihilated by death; but removed to ſome more durable ſtate of exiſtence; in which they ſhall enjoy endleſs peace and happineſs, if their conduct here ſhall be found to have deſerved it. Whether all nations entertain the idea and the belief of a Supreme Being, has certainly been queſtioned; but it is aſſerted without reſerve, that all expect the immortality of the ſoul. This opinion, it is ſaid, has been found in every country, from the banks of the Ganges to the ſhores of the

Atlantic, and from the coaſts of Labrador to the ſtraits of Magellan. If then it be improbable that any nation of barbarians ſhould invent a religion for themſelves; it is ſtill more improbable that each ſuch nation ſhould have invented nearly the ſame; that all their different ſyſtems ſhould bear in their principal features ſuch a reſemblance to one another; that we cannot forbear to conſider them as the deſcendants of ſome common anceſtor; as collateral ſtreams from the ſame parent ſource.

11. We muſt not, however, and we need not, reſt the deciſion of the queſtion on the religious inſtitutions of ſavages alone. To them it may be juſtly objected; that our accounts are imperfect and obſcure; and our inferences from them conſequently not certain or concluſive. But if we proceed to examine thoſe of nations more civilized and improved; whoſe hiſtory is more authentic, and whoſe faith and worſhip are more intelligible; we ſhall find in them ſtill ſtronger marks of a divine revelation; opinions ſtill leſs remote from the doctrines of our ſcriptures. In moſt of their ſyſtems of religion

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are found traces of a chaos and a creation; of the propagation of the human race from a ſmall number, or a ſingle pair; of a deſtruction by a deluge; and of the reſtoration of mankind by a family that eſcaped the general calamity. In all are found accounts, that the Deity or his miniſters have condeſcended to hold intercourſe with men; that himſelf or his agents have inſtructed them, as well in the arts of procuring ſubſiſtence, as in the rules and principles of the moral and ſocial duties. This is the baſis of the religion of the Tartars at this day: And "in the modern ſyſtem of the Japaneſe," ſays Thunberg, "we diſcover the offspring of human wit; whilſt their antient ſyſtem exhibits evident traces of the divine law of Moſes."

Another circumſtance of material importance in confirmation of our hypotheſis is the univerſality of ſacrifice. We have not from nature or reaſon any grounds to imagine, that we can render ourſelves acceptable to the Deity, by taking away the life we did not give, and cannot reſtore; and ſtill leſs to ſuppoſe, that *the blood of bulls and of goats can take away ſin.* Yet of every religion, known

known before Chriſtianity, did ſacrifice make a principal part; and that too with the ſame deſign; to engage the favour of their gods towards ſome enterprize they meditated; or their pardon for ſome offence they had committed. And to what can a rite ſo univerſal and inexplicable be imputed, but to the divine appointment at firſt, and afterwards to tradition and imitation. It is obviouſly fair to aſcribe that to a revelation from heaven, which cannot reaſonably or plauſibly be aſcribed to any other cauſe.

12. If we aſcend to the theology of Greece and Rome, we ſhall find the traces of this revelation ſtill leſs equivocal, than in the doctrines of nations leſs refined; diſcoloured indeed by a mixture of oriental myſteries, diſguiſed by the fanciful decorations of fable, and debaſed by the abſurdities of ſuperſtition; but ſtill too numerous to be overlooked, and too ſtrong to be miſtaken. Whence indeed, but from revelation, could they obtain opinions ſo analogous to it, as are occaſionally found in their writings, reſpecting a creation and a providence, the rules of morality, the immortality of the

ſoul,

ſoul, and a future ſtate of retribution. Whence indeed, but from the oracles of truth, could they have borrowed thoſe numerous imitations of it, which are ſtill diſcernible in their mythology. Not to inſiſt on any obſcure and diſputable points of reſemblance; not to dwell on ſuch analogies, as have been formed, between the characters of Noah and of Saturn; or between the tranſactions of Moſes and of Bacchus; let a compariſon be made between the innocence and fall of man in ſcripture, and the heathen degeneracy from the golden to the iron age; between the ſacrifice of Iſaac and of Iphigenia; between the deluges of Noah and of Deucalion; and between many other points of ſacred hiſtory and claſſical fable; and little doubt will remain, but the latter were borrowed from the former. The poſſibilities of fiction are infinite: and it ſeems therefore not credible that coincidences ſo extraordinary, in inſtances ſo numerous, ſhould happen from accident only; that truth in Aſia ſhould agree with fiction in Greece; or that both ſhould be the independent offspring of imagination alone.

That

That Plato was greatly indebted to the ſcriptures or the traditions of the Jews, very conſiderable, and perhaps ſatisfactory, evidence may be traced in the writings of Plato himſelf. He not only expreſſes, on many occaſions, ſentiments the moſt worthy of the Deity, and the moſt nearly reſembling thoſe of holy writ; but he repeatedly acknowledges, what appears to be the fact, that theſe ſentiments were not the diſcoveries of his own underſtanding; that he derived them from what he calls plauſible fables, antient records, or ſacred tradition*. Let us indeed but ſuppoſe for a moment that Plato and the other heathen philoſophers were indebted, for their beſt conceptions of the divine nature, and their beſt principles and precepts of morality, to the traditional re-

* Paſſages to this effect occur in the Phædon, the Defence of Socrates, the Phædrus, Georgias, Philebus, and indeed in almoſt every part of his works. And as theſe paſſages ſhew that he borrowed his theological tenets ſomewhere, Menagius in his very learned notes on Diogenes Laertius, lib. 3. has ſhewn what hiſtorical probability there is, or rather what hiſtorical evidence remains, that he borrowed them from the Hebrews. A valuable note to the ſame purpoſe may be ſeen in *Leland's advantage and neceſſity of the Chriſtian Revelation.* Vol. 1. p. 403.

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mains of an original and primeval revelation, or to what they had collected from ſome imperfect acquaintance with the Jewiſh ſcriptures; and we ſhall immediately perceive that the ſuppoſition will remove ſome material difficulties, and carry in itſelf conſiderable marks of probability. Their beſt ſentiments on theſe important points are often abruptly introduced, and as abruptly quitted; they do not reaſon upon them with that conſiſtency, which is generally to be traced in the mind's own diſcoveries; nor purſue them through all their natural conſequences. They do not ſtate the proceſs of inveſtigation by which they were obtained; which it is always practicable to do in our own acquiſitions; and for their opinions, they often give an authority inſtead of a proof. Each has founded his ſyſtem of ethics, on the beſt baſis his underſtanding could ſuggeſt; ſupported it by the beſt ſanctions, his obſervation and knowledge could ſupply; and explained it in detail, as beſt correſponded with his own hypotheſis. Some of their maxims of prudence, or precepts of morality, they have themſelves aſcribed to their oracles or gods; and by ſome moderns they have been ſuppoſed,

poſed, either to have diſcovered truths worthy of Chriſtianity; or to have been peculiarly endowed or inſpired, to prevent the total loſs of religion in the gentile world. But ſuppoſe a part of the divine communications to have been loſt, as well as the true origin of what remained; and we ſhall no longer wonder that their particular rules of morality are ſo excellent, yet the ſyſtem ſo imperfect; that where the ſyſtem is beſt, the baſis is ſo viſionary, or the ſanctions ſo inſufficient; or that in their theology, occaſional ſublimity and purity are mixed with at leaſt an equal portion of abſurdity and corruption. The plauſibility of this ſuppoſition is no ſlight recommendation of it; and its conſiſtency with itſelf, and with many acknowledged facts, is preſumptive evidence of its truth.

The general opinion has been, that Plato was indebted for much of his philoſophy to the Egyptians; and Egypt has uſually been conſidered as the country, where ſcience firſt dawned upon mankind; where were firſt invented many of the moſt uſeful arts of life. But allowing her full credit for her

ingenuity and improvements in art and ſcience, it will not be eaſy to eſtabliſh her claim to pre-eminence in theology. If her ſentiments in religion may be determined by her idolatry, her doctrines by her worſhip, they were at a wide diſtance from refinement, ſublimity, or truth. Her Hieroglyphics have not yet been proved to be much more valuable, than the *picture-writing* of the humbler inhabitants of Mexico; and they are perhaps allowed to be the more profound, in proportion as they are leſs underſtood.

But whatever was the nature or the extent of the celebrated wiſdom of Egypt, it does not appear to have been originally her own. We are informed, upon authority*, which there is no reaſon to queſtion, that while Abraham reſided at the court of Pharaoh, he taught aſtronomy to the Egyptians; and it ſeems ſtill more reaſonable to ſuppoſe, that he would teach them the rudiments of true theology; that by his inſtructions or his devotions, he would communicate ſome

* Euſeb. Præp. Evang.

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knowledge of the proper object of worſhip. From the time too that the Iſraelites were in captivity among them, they kept up a continual intercourſe with Judea; and could therefore be at no loſs for whatever they choſe to adopt from the religious doctrines of the Jewiſh nation. With all her obligations, again, Greece was not indebted to Egypt for her alphabet, but to the Phenicians; and they to the Jews. With great appearance of truth too, the honour of giving birth to ſcience has been claimed by modern enquirers for Indoſtan; as more immediately the pupil of revelation, and the inſtructor of Egypt herſelf. The Bramins, it is true, claim an antiquity for their theology, much ſuperior to that of the Jewiſh law. But beſides that this claim has been not only controverted, but generally exploded; it is much more probable in itſelf, that authenticity ſhould be found in the dignified ſimplicity of ſcripture, than in the myſtic fables of the Bramins; that they ſhould have enlarged and disfigured the precepts or the narratives of Moſes; than that he ſhould have abridged and ſimplified their extravagant allegories, to the ſemblance and conſiſtency of truth.

But

But even ſuppoſing them to have eſtabliſhed their pretenſions to an antiquity, equal or ſuperior to that of the Jewiſh lawgiver; ſtill there were, according to our ſcriptures, other ſources of revelation, from whence their theology might be drawn. It was one reaſon, we may ſuppoſe, for exempting the choſen family from the general calamity of the deluge; that they might preſerve ſuch knowledge of their Creator, of his providence, and his commands, as had already been revealed; and this knowledge would afterwards naturally be diſperſed, with the diſperſion of the ſons of Noah; and preſerved in every country, from the time the country itſelf was peopled. To this were added from time to time the divine communications to the patriarchs and prophets; and theſe, no doubt, carried by migration or tradition to the neighbouring nations; and whether juſtly or erroneouſly underſtood, however corrupted or enlarged, by imagination, ignorance, or artifice, in ſome degree incorporated with what was already the national creed. In tranſactions ſo antient, when letters were not generally known, or not in general uſe, we cannot expect hiſto-

rical documents to be either very numerous or very exact: but there ſeems to be ſufficient evidence, when ſupported by the probability of the hypotheſis itſelf, to confirm the general outline of the ſtatement that has been made; to render it credible, that all the nations of the earth have been indebted, for the firſt principles of their theology, to the hiſtory, the traditions, or the ſcriptures of thoſe, *unto whom were committed the oracles of God.* If it appear in any degree probable, that a divine revelation was ever given to mankind; it ſeems equally probable, that it was given in the time and manner, in which the ſacred volumes have announced it. The hypotheſis that has been maintained, and the records of holy writ may be allowed by their conſiſtency, without the charge of arguing in a circle, to give and to receive mutual ſupport and confirmation.

To the different conſiderations, that have been brought forward, different men, no doubt, will allow very different degrees of weight and importance. They are to be viewed, however, not ſingly, but collectively; not in their ſeparate, but united,

force. The opinion is maintained; becauſe circumſtances ſo numerous, in the eſſential attributes of the Deity, and in the appearances of nature, in the civil and religious inſtitutions, and in the hiſtory and ſituation of mankind, either bear poſitive teſtimony in its favour, or are reconcileable to it, and beſt accounted for on the ſuppoſition of its truth. A thouſand lines of probability all terminate in the ſame point: evidence may be traced upwards by a thouſand channels to the ſame general ſource. We have from every quarter, from almoſt every thing within or without us, reaſons to be convinced, that the Creator has revealed his will to mankind; and that our ſcriptures are, what they profeſs to be, the word of God*.

* The following argument was originally intended to make a part of the lecture. But as it ſeemed to interrupt the general train of reaſoning, it is ſubjoined in the form of a note. It cannot be too often repeated.

The probability that God has revealed his will to mankind, and that this revelation is contained in our ſcriptures, may be yet further ſupported by the well-known argument, from the antient hiſtory and preſent circumſtances of the Jewiſh nation; and eſpecially from the ſeveral prophecies that announced their diſperſion; and

the remarkable and continued accompliſhment of them, through the lapſe of ſo many centuries. With the direct evidence of Chriſtianity; and therefore with the ſubject of prophecy in general, it has already been declared, the preſent lecture is not immediately concerned: nor is it intended to enter into any critical enquiry, which of the predictions in queſtion were wholly or partially fulfilled, in the earlier wars or captivities of the Jews; in the famines or the ſieges they ſuffered at Jeruſalem. But from their conduct and ſituation an argument has been drawn, in favour of the truth of Chriſtianity, depending ſo much upon tranſactions at this day paſſing in the world, and ſo open to general and even ſuperficial obſervation; that it ſeems well entitled to a place amongſt ſuch probabilities, as have already been adduced. It is an argument too ſo forcible and concluſive in itſelf, that, how frequently ſo ever it may have been urged already, it cannot be omitted without injuſtice to the cauſe, which it is ſo well calculated to ſupport.

To the hiſtory and fortunes of the Jews, nothing parallel can be pointed out in the annals of mankind. Individuals of the nation are found in almoſt every inhabited portion of the globe; yet in none have they any permanent eſtabliſhment. They are mixed with every civilized ſociety; yet of none do they form any eſſential part. They are not admitted to a ſhare in any public counſel; nor in the authority of any government. They are in every country deſpiſed and inſulted; and in moſt they have been at different times perſecuted and plundered. Even riches have not procured for them, what they ſeldom fail to procure for other men, power, influence, or reſpect. In ſtrict conformity to the prophecy, *the Lord hath*

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ſcattered them among all people, and from one end of the earth even unto the other *; and *they are become an aſtoniſhment, a proverb, and a bye-word amongſt all nations, whither the Lord hath led them* †. Yet to this reproach they do not ſeem ſolicitous to put an end: they have not made any vigorous efforts to eſcape from it. The diſcovery of the weſtern continent, and its extenſive and uncultivated waſtes, ſeemed to offer them both opportunity and encouragement to fly from the inſults they endure; to eſtabliſh themſelves under their own government and laws; and once more to aſſume a rank in the catalogue of nations. But this encouragement, for whatever reaſon, they have neglected: this opportunity they have not embraced.

Nor is it the leaſt remarkable circumſtance in their ſtory; that under the preſſure of all theſe difficulties; and in oppoſition to the fate of the fugitives from all other countries; they ſtill continue a diſtinct and ſeparate people. When the natives of other regions have been diſperſed by flight or captivities, they have generally ſoon been mingled and incorporated with any nation, in which they had ſought a refuge; and their own name and peculiarities quickly forgotten. Of the once famed inhabitants of Babylon or Carthage not a veſtige can now be traced. But the Jews *are not caſt away nor utterly deſtroyed* ‡. Amidſt the revolutions, and even the ruins, of many countries, to which they have fled for refuge, they have preſerved themſelves and their ſingularities of character and conduct, almoſt as unchanged, as if they were ſtill in poſſeſſion of *their own place and nation*. Theſe circumſtances ſurely may, without ſuperſtition or pre-

* Deut. xxviii. 64. † Deut. xxviii. 37.
‡ Levit. xxvi. 44.

ſumption, be conſidered as miraculous; as bearing their own evidence of the immediate direction of the Almighty.

It has indeed been ſuppoſed that they may be reaſonably and fairly accounted for, from political and moral cauſes alone; from the unſocial policy and manners of the Jews; from their pertinacious adherence to the ordinances of their law, in the peculiarities of their religious ceremonies; in the diſtinctions of their food; and in their rejection of marriage and alliance with the individuals of other nations. This pertinacious adherence too, it is obſerved, is confirmed and continued, both by the inſults they receive on one hand, and by the hopes they entertain, on the other, of being one day reſtored to the poſſeſſion of their own city, and to a peculiar ſhare of the divine favour. But whatever human reaſons may be aſſigned for the facts themſelves; their coincidence with the prophecies can be ſatisfactorily accounted for on one principle alone. The Jews in their preſent ſtate exhibit a ſtanding monument, not only of the juſtice and power of God; but of the moral government of the world by his providence; and of the truth of that revelation, which our Scriptures have recorded.

SERMON

SERMON IV.

THE DOCTRINES AND PRECEPTS OF THE CHRISTIAN REVELATION FAVOURABLE TO THE ENJOYMENTS OF THE PRESENT LIFE.

1 TIM. iv. 8.

Godlineſs is profitable unto all things; having promiſe of the life that now is, and of that which is to come.

THE principal object, which almoſt every religion has profeſſed to purſue, has been to ſecure the happineſs of mankind in a life to come; as the conſequence, indeed, and the reward of obedience to its laws in their preſent ſtate. But beſides the proſpect of future felicity, each has generally offered to its followers the additional encouragement of immediate advantages and enjoyments. To men of virtue and piety have been promiſed peace of mind and temporal proſperity; pri-

vate comfort and public tranquillity; the favour and bleſſing of their creator, as the preſent effect of their duty to their fellow-creatures.

In eſtimating the merits, therefore, of rival religions; in deciding on their reſpective claims to a divine origin and divine authority, one fair ground of judging will be;—with what degree of wiſdom each appears to be adapted to its own purpoſes, and to the preſent circumſtances and character of man. According to our beſt notions of the attributes of the Deity, that religion is probably derived from him, of which the general tendency is to produce humanity and benevolence; and of which the particular duties are immediately and in themſelves beneficial; which co-operates with the beſt qualities of the individual, and the beſt laws of government, in the promotion of perſonal and national virtue and happineſs. Upon this principle it is that, in addition to the probabilities ſtated on a former occaſion, we aſſert the ſuitableneſs of the Chriſtian revelation to the preſent condition of mankind, as another teſtimony of its authenticity.

This conſideration, it is obvious, like thoſe to which we have juſt alluded, amounts not to direct, but only to preſumptive proof; it is the criterion, not of certainty, but of credibility. This evidence, however, whatever be its force, we claim with confidence for the religion we profeſs: we maintain that; independently of its principal purpoſe, our attaining *to the life and immortality, which it has brought to light*; we ſhall alſo by obedience to its laws, have the faireſt chance for temporal enjoyments; that, according to the language of the apoſtle, *Godlineſs is profitable unto all things; having the promiſe of the life that now is, as well as of that which is to come.*

This argument, however, in favour of our religion, will not be allowed us without a conteſt. For the ſuppoſed enmity of Chriſtianity to many of our pleaſures; its pretended unfitneſs for the preſent ſtate of human nature and human ſociety, is often conſidered as an objection to its credibility; as a ſtrong preſumption, that it could not proceed from the ſame Creator; who implanted the propenſities, which it contradicts

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and condemns. It is true that this objection rather operates on the minds of individuals, as a diſcouragement to religion, or as a ſubject of complaint againſt it, than is maintained as the doctrine of any particular deſcription of unbelievers; and that its influence does not depend ſo much on its own native force, as on its giving weight and efficacy to others. It is true alſo, that many of thoſe, who are influenced by it, miſtake the rites of religious worſhip, or the laws of an eccleſiaſtical eſtabliſhment, for the eſſential doctrines of the religion itſelf; and that they do not ſo much oppoſe revelation by argument, as reject it without examination. But if the objection is not much inſiſted on in the diſquiſitions of the philoſopher; it is continually aſſerted by men of the world; if it be not entitled to much attention for its ſtrength or ingenuity; it riſes into importance by its miſchievous effects on morality.

That we may not wander in too wide a field of diſcuſſion, it will be neceſſary to reduce the objection in ſome meaſure to diſtinct propoſitions; and to confine ourſelves

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to a few of the leading articles, of which it appears to conſiſt.

Men of the world complain, for inſtance, that our religion, or at leaſt our eccleſiaſtical eſtabliſhment, by its appointment of days of faſting and mortification, preſcribes reſtrictions at once uſeleſs in themſelves, and painful in the performance; ſometimes injurious to health; and not likely to render us acceptable to God; as they teach us only to reject his bounty and his bleſſings. They complain again, that our religion is hoſtile to many of the general and neceſſary arts of trade; to thoſe arts by which the merchant may moſt ſpeedily attain to wealth, diſtinction, and enjoyment. They complain that by its prohibitions of reſentment and revenge, it ſeems not only to preclude in many caſes the right of ſelf-defence; but to deſtroy that honour and ſpirit, which conſtitute or ſecure the true character and dignity of man. They complain laſtly in general, that it enjoins us to reſtrain or to extirpate thoſe appetites, which it were happineſs to indulge; and that it would introduce ſuch a melancholy

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and gloomy habit of mind; ſuch dejection and terror of ſpirit; as muſt not only deſtroy all the pleaſures of life; but unfit us for the diſcharge of many of its duties.

1. With reſpect to faſting, as a religious duty, it has been maintained; that neither our Saviour nor his apoſtles have any where directly enjoined it. But to this it may be replied; that the omiſſion of ſuch injunction ſeems to have ariſen only from their having ſuppoſed injunction unneceſſary for a practice, which they found already eſtabliſhed in the religion of the Jews; and in that religion, what they did not repeal, they confirmed. They had no occaſion to command what was already received; and they have by their language and their actions, not only recogniſed and countenanced the rite, but given directions for its decent and devout performance. Under this ſanction it is, that our church appoints her days of faſting and humiliation; and we conceive that what the church has appointed, the propriety of the duty itſelf will confirm.

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We do not ſuppoſe that voluntary ſubmiſſion to pain has any merit; but where it is neceſſary to the performance of our duty: we do not ſuppoſe that a temporary change of food, or a temporary abſtinence from it, can of itſelf recommend us to the favour of God. But our days of faſting are appointed as ſeaſons for thought, meditation, and prayer. Cool reflection is the moſt irreſiſtible enemy of ſin. To think is generally all we want, to make us believe what we ought, and practiſe what we believe. But it is only when pleaſure and its allurements are ſuſpended; when company and buſineſs are at a diſtance, that the mind will turn inward upon itſelf; and with due care and ſeverity examine its own condition, opinions, and principles. When the appetites are not pampered, the paſſions are not inflamed. It is at ſuch ſeaſons, therefore, that we ſhall be beſt able to form juſt ſentiments and good reſolutions; to give truth and religion ſuch aſcendancy in the mind, that they may afterwards become the guide of our actions, amidſt the tumults and temptations of the world.

By occaſionally denying indulgence to our appetites; inſtead of being enſlaved and corrupted by our ſenſes; we ſhall bring them under an eaſy and habitual ſubjection to our underſtanding. We ſhall indeed obtain the double advantage; of being able to command our paſſions, whenever temptation would ſurprize us; and to endure, without inconvenience or impatience, thoſe occaſional ſeverities, to which our duty or our intereſt may expoſe us.

Occaſional faſting may be further recommended, as conducive to health. Almoſt every man, not reſtrained by his ſituation and circumſtances, conſumes a much larger proportion of food, than nature and neceſſity require: and as nothing more certainly and rapidly impairs the conſtitution, than habitual repletion and exceſs; for the preſervation or recovery of it, nothing can be more ſuitable or effectual, than occaſional and ſeaſonable abſtinence. Our duty and our intereſt are generally united. What is ſo uſeful in a moral view, and enjoined chiefly for moral purpoſes; contributes at the ſame time to the preſervation of our

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ſtrength and faculties; to the length and the enjoyment of life*.

Faſting and humiliation, again, may with propriety be employed, as expreſſions of penitence; when we have abuſed the gifts of providence by intemperance and exceſs. This indeed ſeems natural to the human mind. It has in almoſt all ages and nations been cuſtomary for religious and pious men to expreſs their ſorrow for intemperance, by denying themſelves ordinary indulgence; and to endeavour, as well to recover, by voluntary mortification, the purity they were ſuppoſed to have loſt; as to avert the diſpleaſure of heaven, by inflicting ſuch an appropriate puniſhment upon themſelves.

In the obſervance of a faſt, prayer and confeſſion always make a part. The uſe

* Occaſional general faſts might be recommended as a political inſtitution: for they might produce material benefits to a nation; by diminiſhing the conſumption of animal food. But this either has no connection with religion and morality, and therefore does not apply to the preſent purpoſe; or religion muſt be made the pretext for policy; a mode of proceeding ſurely not entitled to be recommended for imitation.

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and importance of prayer ſhall hereafter be examined: and with reſpect to the confeſſion of our offences; it is univerſally allowed to have a powerful tendency to rectify our principles and conduct. While we enumerate our tranſgreſſions, the mind naturally dwells upon their guilt and danger; we make a new covenant of obedience with ourſelves and with our God; and we cannot avoid reflecting that repentance without reformation is but *the form of godlineſs without the power*; and muſt neceſſarily offend him, *from whom no ſecrets are hid.*

The appointment and the regulation of ſtated ſeaſons for faſting and humiliation have formed a part of the ritual of almoſt every religion of the known world: and this ſurely is no contemptible evidence of their uſe and propriety. Thoſe indeed, who maintain that all religion had its origin in divine revelation, will conſider the univerſality of this rite, only as one proof more in ſupport of their hypotheſis. But to thoſe by whom that hypotheſis is not admitted, the exiſtence of the practice in ſuch diſtant parts and diſtant periods of the world, muſt be

be an unanſwerable argument; if not of the utility of the rite itſelf; at leaſt of the general opinion in its favour.

To faſting and humiliation it is not only cuſtomary but reaſonable to have recourſe, in caſes of ſevere affliction; whether felt or feared, whether perſonal or national. As we believe theſe viſitations of providence to be either trials of our obedience, or inflictions for our offences; it is natural to humble ourſelves before him; to entreat he will either alleviate or avert them. He alone has power and authority to ſoften the ſeverity of our probation or our puniſhment. And whatever may be urged reſpecting the immutable nature, or the immutable juſtice, of the Deity; we ſtill maintain that human contrition muſt be ſhewn by ſome human expreſſion of it; and that every idea of a moral governour includes the idea of the right and the inclination to pardon penitent offenders. All civilized nations have ſuppoſed their gods to be offended with their crimes; but placable by repentance; and Chriſtians, in particular, are taught to believe, that for

all offences, of which they truly repent, atonement has been made.

With what frequency days of public or private faſting and humiliation ſhall be appointed; and with what peculiar ſolemnities they ſhall be obſerved; muſt be determined by the judgment and the circumſtances of individuals or of nations. Neither the number of ſuch ſeaſons, nor any appropriate forms of devotion, have been preſcribed by divine revelation. Theſe acts of piety, like moſt other external ceremonies of religion, are left to be fixed and obſerved, as every man's own conſcience may ſuggeſt, as public authority may direct, or the viſitations of providence may ſeem to require.

This diſcipline then of our church, this appointment of ſeaſons of faſting and humiliation, is neither a uſeleſs mortification to ourſelves, nor an object of juſt ridicule or cenſure to our enemies. But it is a wiſe and ſalutary inſtitution; calculated to aid occaſional penitence, or habitual piety; to improve the knowlede of our duty; and to impreſs

impreſs upon our minds its importance and obligations*.

2. The ſecond complaint of worldly-minded men againſt the Chriſtian revelation is, that the ſtrict morality, which it requires, is incompatible with ſucceſs in commercial tranſactions: and they too often on that account diſbelieve or diſregard it. In order to enhance the profits of trade, and the ſooner

* As theſe arguments have been urged, as much as might be, independently of divine revelation, and are intended to apply to the propriety of faſting in general, whether public or private, ſtated or occaſional, it may be proper to produce here authorities for each from ſcripture. For inſtances of public faſts, ſee Judg. xx. 26. and Jonah iii. 5. For inſtances of private faſting, ſee Pſalm lxix. 10. and Dan. ix. 3. For the ſtated faſt, ſee Levit. xxiii. 26. and Numb. xxix. 7. And for the occaſional, ſee Joel ii. 12. and 1 Sam. vii. 5. In the new teſtament the practice is ſo far from being diſcountenanced; that our Saviour prepared himſelf for his miniſtry by a faſt of forty days; and has given directions for the due obſervance of faſts in general, in oppoſition to the oſtentation and hypocriſy of the Jews, Matt. vi. 16. It is alſo recogniſed again, and indeed enjoined, Matt. ix. 14, and in the correſponding paſſages, Mark ii. 18. and Luke v. 33. It appears alſo to have been the regular practice of the Apoſtles and firſt converts to Chriſtianity, Acts xiii. 2, and xiv. 23.

to obtain opulence and diſtinction, many artifices are employed by them, which each individual conſiders as made neceſſary to himſelf by the general practice; but which he knows religion condemns. With a view therefore to quiet his conſcience without relinquiſhing his gains; to indulge his favourite purſuit, without forfeiting his own approbation; each adopts ſuch an expedient as beſt ſuits the temper of his mind, or the circumſtances of his life. One man diveſts himſelf of all regard to revelation and its laws; another, who finds that impoſſible, truſts that ſome allowance will be made for the neceſſities of his ſituation; and a third flies to thoſe falſe and fatal teachers of religion; who would ſeparate morality from piety, and perſuade us that faith alone is ſufficient for ſalvation. We ſhall endeavour to convince ſuch men, that theſe artifices are unjuſtifiable on the principles of right reaſon, as well as condemned by divine revelation; to reconcile them to the Chriſtian religion, as the teacher of what is moſt beneficial, as well as what is moſt upright; as containing rules of morality, which, inſtead of being

an objection to it, conſtitute one of its ſtrongeſt recommendations.

Should it, however, not be ſatisfactorily proved from reaſon alone, that the artifices of the trader are immoral and pernicious; let him not triumph in his victory, or his practice; for we ſtill conſider revelation as the final and deciſive authority; and only wave it for the preſent, in order to expoſe his error on his own ground; on principles which he cannot ſo eaſily diſpute.

One violation of integrity, which the trader too often allows himſelf to practiſe without ſcruple, is that recommendation of his merchandiſe, which he knows it does not deſerve; the extravagant praiſes of its good qualities, and the ſtudious concealment of its blemiſhes and defects. It is true, perhaps, that theſe encomiums deceive none but the ignorant and unwary.—But if they are not intended to deceive, why are they employed? In whatever degree truſt is repoſed in them, that truſt is betrayed: and whatever numbers may be guilty of the wrong, they cannot convert it into right. It is the

deciſion of Cicero, and it is juſt; that whatever the ſeller knows reſpecting what he offers for ſale, ought to be fairly explained to the purchaſer; becauſe in whatever degree he is kept in ignorance of what he ought to know; in the ſame degree he is impoſed upon and injured. All deception too is in its effects injurious to ſociety; for it weakens that confidence between man and man; on which the advantages and happineſs of ſociety ſo eſſentially depend.

There are other occaſions on which commercial falſhood is practiſed with a yet greater degree of guilt; becauſe it is confirmed by the ſanction of an oath; by the moſt ſolemn aſſurance that man can give to man. Whether the ſanctions of religion have not been introduced on too many and too frivolous occaſions, has indeed been made a queſtion; but perhaps without due conſideration. Where the integrity of the merchant muſt be depended on for the quality of his merchandiſe; it does not ſeem eaſy to find any tie upon his conſcience, more ſuitable or more efficacious than an oath; and theſe oaths have unavoidably been multiplied,

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with the encreaſe of our population, and the extenſion of our commerce. It is the haſte and negligence, with which they are adminiſtered on one hand, and the irreverence and indifference, with which they are taken on the other, that has deſtroyed their ſolemnity and effect; that has occaſioned their being conſidered, rather as a mere regulation of commerce, than as the moſt ſacred teſt of truth. But whatever may have been the numbers or the negligence of thoſe who have gone before us; to each individual the oath ſtill retains its ſanctity and obligation; and he who takes it falſely, does not more violate the precepts of religion, than injure the intereſts of ſociety. For he weakens the beſt principle on which mutual confidence is ſupported, truth inveſtigated, and juſtice adminiſtered *.

Nor

* The complaint againſt the frequency of oaths ſeems to ariſe from a notion or a principle, which I can by no means admit to be juſt; a notion that religion is of too ſolemn a nature to be generally mixed with our common tranſactions; that a man in his ordinary buſineſs had better leave it out of ſight. To this I muſt decidedly object. Religion is intended to form the univerſal principle of our conduct; it ought to influence not only our actions,

Nor ought it to be forgotten, that by no appointment of nature or providence are wealth and diſtinction made neceſſary to the

but our ſentiments, on all occaſions, ſmall as well as great. However trifling the tranſaction may be, in which we are engaged; our integrity in conducting it is always of importance. A man need not always offenſively obtrude topics of religion; nor need he be always meditating on its doctrines and its laws: but it ſhould be the fixed and ſettled principle of his mind, always operating, though not always perceived; and I cannot ſee why he, who makes it the general guide of his actions, ſhould object to its being brought forward as ſuch; why he, who binds his conſcience by the laws of God, ſhould think it improper to aſſure us explicitly that he does ſo; and that is the principal end and deſign of an oath. I am afraid too oaths are ſometimes objected to; becauſe men would gladly be excuſed from taking ſuch, as they are conſcious they ſhall not duly obſerve; and ſometimes as a part of that indifference to religion, and that indiſpoſition to its duties, which ſo ſtrongly mark the temper and manners of the times. Oaths, however, would not be treated with ſo much levity; nor be found ſo extremely inefficacious; were the magiſtrate always to adminiſter them with proper ſolemnity; and occaſionally to remind ſuch, as by their ignorance or negligence ſeemed to ſtand in need of it, of their ſanctity and obligation. Where indeed there is ſuch an incorrigible want of principle; ſuch a total inattention to every thing but profit; that an oath is no tie upon the conſcience; I know not what other ſecurity could be expected to be more effectual.

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attainment of virtue or happineſs: and that if they were ſo, many have obtained them, not only without the practice of any of thoſe unwarrantable artifices, but by their being known to diſdain them. Many, and perhaps the greater number, have built high fortune upon fair reputation; and made their way into the temple of honour, by the direct but laborious paſſage through the temple of virtue.

The perfect morality of the goſpel is again frequently violated; and not more by men of buſineſs, than by other men; in the evaſion of thoſe contributions, which are required for the exigencies of the ſtate. This too ſome men will endeavour to reconcile to their own conſciences, and to juſtify to others, by maintaining, that the poſitive ſtatutes of policy have no relation to moral duties; that the omiſſion of what was not required at all, till the legiſlature required it, is no offence againſt religion or againſt God. If you tranſgreſs, it is the magiſtrate's buſineſs, they aſſert, to detect your tranſgreſſion; to inflict the penalties of the law; and there the matter is to terminate; for that the whole

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turns upon policy not morality. This is indeed ſometimes the reaſoning of the gameſter and the felon; and ſurely it is fit only for them. This principle makes all the obligation to political duties to conſiſt in compulſion; and all the guilt of tranſgreſſion in being detected; an abſurdity, which needs only to be ſtated, to be expoſed. It would make a ſeparation too of our moral from our political duties; a ſeparation, which cannot without ſome confuſion be made in theory, and which in practice can have no exiſtence. But were the ſeparation more eaſy and practicable than even its advocates ſuppoſe it; and were political diſobedience, as ſuch, juſtifiable in itſelf; it never can be exerted, without involving moral turpitude in its conſequences; without injury to individuals of the ſame community. In the caſe under conſideration, it is obvious, that if one contribute leſs than his proportion, another muſt contribute more, and conſequently be injured: and were every member to evade his contribution, it is equally obvious, government muſt immediately ceaſe, and the ſociety be diſſolved.

But

But the deciſive argument is; that every individual is permitted to enter into any given ſociety, or to continue in it upon his perſonal engagement, expreſſed or implied, to ſubmit to all its regulations; to perform his ſocial duties; and to bear his proportion of its burthens, while he receives its protection. Obedience to government, therefore, becomes immediately united with his other moral obligations; as well by the reaſon and neceſſity of the caſe, as by the authority of divine revelation.

If then inſtead of theſe unjuſtifiable reaſonings, and ſtill more unjuſtifiable practices, the precepts of Chriſtianity were generally ſubmitted to and obeyed; its moſt inveterate enemies would ſoon ſee and acknowledge the eaſe and ſatisfaction, which would be introduced into the daily intercourſe of human life. Inſtead of intereſted diſtinctions to evade plain rules of action, we ſhould every where find practical virtue; and inſtead of ſophiſtical queſtions on the origin and authority of government, peaceable ſubmiſſion to eſtabliſhed laws. Fraud would be baniſhed from our tranſactions, and the ſuſpicion of it from

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our minds: our preſent condition would be almoſt as much improved, as our proſpects for futurity are enlarged and exalted.

3. Men of the world again think Chriſtianity unſuitable to the preſent life, in its prohibitions of reſentment and revenge; and that for various and important reaſons. Such prohibitions, appear to them to diſparage that courage, which all mankind have agreed to applaud; and in the ſame degree to teach that puſillanimity, which is univerſally deſpiſed. The deſire of revenge, they maintain, is not only natural to the mind of man; but neceſſary in the preſent ſtate of morals. From the follies or the vices of thoſe about him every man, they pretend, ſuffers ſo many injuries or inſults, that it is next to impoſſible to bear them with patience; and that he, who ſhould receive them without reſentment, would forfeit his dignity and character; and expoſe himſelf, certainly to loſs, and probably to deſtruction. The ſame right which permits a man to defend life itſelf, muſt permit him, they aſſert, to defend all its advantages and enjoyments; and that on whatever grounds war be juſtifiable between different nations;

nations; it muſt on the ſame grounds be juſtifiable between different individuals. They oppoſe religion; becauſe religion oppoſes the laws of modern honour; becauſe it does not allow them to vindicate their character, or expiate an affront, with the blood of the offender.

That the precepts of religion condemn what are called the laws of modern honour, will be allowed in the fulleſt extent; and religion, we truſt, may be vindicated by ſhewing, that common ſenſe and the intereſts of ſociety equally condemn them. The pretexts, by which they are ſupported, are unfounded or fallacious.

That courage is univerſally applauded is true, and it is juſt; for courage is neceſſary to every man; to defend himſelf againſt perſonal violence; to ſupport him in the practice of virtue; and to enable him to bear, as he ought, the calamities incident to human life. But this is courage exerted in a cauſe confeſſedly good; and he, who in theſe caſes betrays a want of it, is generally and juſtly deſpiſed. It has very little relation to

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the principles or conduct of the duelliſt; and affords him neither juſtification nor apology.

That the deſire of revenge is natural to the mind of man, is a poſition which may reaſonably be diſputed; and perhaps ſafely denied. The deſire of revenge is not found in every mind: and where it exiſts in the greateſt force, does not appear to be ſo much the inſtinct of nature, as the effect of our corruption. We are indeed inſtinctively prompted to ſelf-defence and ſelf-protection; to ſeek redreſs for injuries received; with a view both to repair the preſent loſs, and to prevent its repetition. But whatever is more than this, is exceſſive and vicious; and was generally condemned in the ethics of heathen philoſophy, as well as in the precepts of the Chriſtian revelation. In every civilized ſociety too, each individual has relinquiſhed the privilege of avenging his own wrongs; and inveſted the magiſtrate with full powers, both to eſtimate the injury, and to apportion the penalty and redreſs. The duelliſt, therefore, without the conſent of any party but himſelf, reſumes a right, which he had relinquiſhed; and offends, not more againſt

religion

religion, than againſt the laws, to which he had himſelf engaged to ſubmit.

If it be urged that there are offences, from which the law does not protect us; that there are inſults to our perſonal dignity, and outrages upon good manners, which duelling only can reſtrain or prevent; it is replied, that theſe offences are rather againſt our pride than our judgment; that they are generally frivolous and fanciful; to be deſpiſed rather than reſented; that he, who is careful not to give offence, will ſeldom receive it; and that, in all events, the ſacrifice of good morals is too high a price for the preſervation of good manners.

But even this advantage is far from being always ſecured. The practice of duelling may reſtrain the weak and timid; but it often adds to the preſumption of the bold. It naturally generates inſolence and cruelty; expoſes to danger the daily intercourſe, which it profeſſes to protect; and arms the man of violence, whom it ought to controul. Its effects are therefore at variance with the principle on which it is defended; it often aggra-

aggravates the evils, it is ſuppoſed to prevent.

If there be indeed offences, which the laws do not and cannot reach; it is one of thoſe imperfections, which no human inſtitution has yet been able to eſcape; it is one of the evils of ſociety, which a wiſe man bears with patience in conſideration of its advantages.

If it be again urged, that duelling is, in the important article of ſelf-defence, the only expedient, which can place the weak on a level with the ſtrong; which can protect the former from the violence and oppreſſion of the latter; it is obvious to reply, that admitting it in this view to remedy one evil, it introduces another of at leaſt equal magnitude: it gives full ſcope to the advantage of ſuperior ſkill; an advantage not only much more certain in its effects than ſtrength, but much more apt to encourage a diſpoſition to exert it. What is loſt by the ſtrong, therefore, is not gained by the weak, but by the ſkilful: one claſs of men are deprived of an advantage, which nature had

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given them; but art transfers the benefit to another; and dexterity of hand obtains a more dangerous ſuperiority than ſtrength poſſeſſed before.

If it be again maintained, that Chriſtian nations in general tacitly admit the utility of duelling; becauſe they oftener connive at, than puniſh, the duelliſt; it may be replied; that almoſt all Chriſtian nations have prohibited duelling by their laws; though it may have been found difficult to carry thoſe laws fully into execution. If the practice be morally wrong, the connivance of the magiſtrate cannot make it right. Civil inſtitutions are ſeldom efficacious againſt public and eſtabliſhed opinions. Governments, in the adminiſtration of juſtice, make allowance for human infirmities; and have frequently only a choice of difficulties; and connive at one evil to prevent a greater.

If it be further urged, that as war between different nations is ſometimes admitted to be juſtifiable; it muſt on ſimilar grounds be juſtifiable between different individuals; the compariſon contains an obvious fallacy. War

is juſtifiable only for ſelf-defence; and the aggreſſor is always criminal. When one nation perſiſts in conduct injurious to another, there is no authority mutually acknowledged, to which they can appeal, and by the deciſion of which they are bound to abide; and it is by war only that the injured community can obtain a compenſation for the grievances already ſuſtained, or guard againſt their repetition. But between individuals, injuries may and ought to be redreſſed by the laws of their country. It is indeed an eſſential principle of ſociety; that its members be protected againſt mutual injuſtice; and that each peaceably ſubmit to its deciſions, in return for the protection he enjoys.

It is a fair mode of trying the expediency of any principle, to ſuppoſe it univerſal; and then to conſider its certain or probable effects. Were the principles of the duelliſt to become general; were every man to inſiſt upon being judge and avenger in his own cauſe; the laws would immediately be rendered nugatory and uſeleſs; the greateſt and beſt advantages of civilized ſociety would be loſt;

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for the ſocial union itſelf muſt be in its moſt eſſential articles diſſolved.

It is an acknowledged maxim amongſt philoſophers and ſtateſmen, as well as divines; that no man is inveſted with full authority over his own life; to expoſe or deſtroy it at his own choice and diſcretion. The life of the humbleſt individual, they juſtly maintain, is of ſome certain or probable value to his family, friends, or connections; that he owes ſervices to the community, which protects him; that as he is indebted to others for much of the good which he enjoys, he ought to endeavour to repay the kindneſs that he has received; and that by ſacrificing his life without neceſſity, he is guilty of a deſertion of duty, as criminal as it is unnatural. Now however unjuſtifiable this may be with reſpect to a man's own life; it muſt be ſtill more unjuſtifiable with reſpect to the life of another: and what then ſhall be urged in vindication of the duelliſt, who is guilty of the double offence at once; who in the ſame moment attempts the life of his adverſary, and hazards the loſs of his own?

As far as it is the object of duelling to ſeek redreſs for injuries real or ſuppoſed, it implies an unavoidable abſurdity: for its laws require that no advantage be given to him by whom the injury has been ſuſtained. Inſtead therefore of inflicting a penalty upon the aggreſſor for the firſt offence; it is careful to afford him an equal chance to commit a ſecond; and inſtead of enſuring redreſs to the ſufferer, it expoſes him to a new danger.

The avowed object of the duelliſt is the defence of his honour: and though it may not be eaſy to determine preciſely what is meant by the expreſſion; when injured honour has received its proper vindication; it is, however, not difficult to decide, how far duelling can really ſupport the character of the duelliſt. Its whole efficacy amounts to this. It will aſcertain, on one hand, whether he who receives an inſult will reſent it at the hazard of life; and on the other, whether he who has been unguarded or unprincipled enough to be guilty of that inſult, has reſolution, at the ſame hazard, to defend his conduct.

Here then ſurely are few of thoſe advantages, which it is the boaſted privilege of duelling to ſeek and to obtain; here is neither juſtice nor reparation, neither puniſhment nor revenge*. Let not therefore the pre-

* The truth is, that duelling is not, and cannot be, defended upon any principle of reaſon or good morals; it is ſupported by public opinion alone. There are certain inſults of language or of action; determined however not ſo much by any fixed and general rule, as by the circumſtances of each particular caſe; which by a kind of tacit agreement men of a certain rank in life, and they only, are expected to reſent by a challenge; and he, who does not ſo reſent them, is conſidered as deficient in ſpirit and degraded in character; he is not ſo well received in ſociety in general; and from certain companies he is entirely excluded. What is worſe, indeed, he who has given the offence, and knows himſelf to be blameable, muſt not acknowledge his fault, till he has ſhewn that he is not afraid to defend it. Nay, what is worſt of all; hardly any man of good underſtanding and principles engages in a duel without the utmoſt reluctance; without an inſuperable conviction that it is unjuſtifiable; and if his antagoniſt falls, never ceaſes to regret and lament it. The late king of Pruſſia eſtabliſhed a court of honour; to which all ſuch offences, as uſually occaſion duelling, were referred; and is ſaid by this means to have in a great meaſure ſuppreſſed the practice in his dominions. Could indeed any vindication of character be deviſed, leſs abſurd

precepts of revelation be cenſured for condemning thoſe hoſtile paſſions of our nature; which it is the aim of all civil inſtitutions to reſtrain; for prohibiting a practice, as abſurd in the individual, as pernicious to the public. Nor let Chriſtianity be ſuppoſed to relax her ſacred rules in favour of the raſh, the violent, and the reſentful. The ſons of God can make no compromiſe with the ſons of Belial; the Chriſtian cannot be united with the duelliſt*.

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and pernicious, and likely to be in any degree effectual, public authority would ſurely be well employed in ſupporting and enforcing it; and in the mean time it is the duty of every good man to endeavour to rectify public opinion on the ſubject; to turn it from duelling, guilt, and bloodſhed, in favour of peace, humanity, and religion. If it ſhould be thought that I have dwelt too long on the ſubject of duelling, and noticed arguments, which hardly deſerve it; my only apology is, that I was not willing to leave the duelliſt any pretext unrefuted. I wiſhed to ſhew him, not only that there are many good arguments againſt the practice; but that there are none in its favour.

* In anſwer to thoſe who object to our religion on account of its prohibitions of duelling, or think the one conſiſtent with the other, it ſhould be obſerved; that their whole argument reſts upon a ſuppoſed diſobedience to the laws

4. Another, and perhaps a more general, complaint againſt Chriſtianity, is founded on the gravity and ſolemnity, of its character, and the ſuppoſed rigour of its laws. A very numerous claſs of men; many of the young, the gay, and the diſſipated; look upon our religion as naturally the enemy of chearfulneſs and feſtivity, of all pleaſure and of all enjoyment. They feel a repugnance to the exerciſes of devotion, as requiring not only a ſerious, but even a melancholy, frame of mind; and to its precepts, as a rigid ſyſtem of mortification and ſelf-denial. They conceive, that all the affections of the heart are to be checked by gloomy meditations on the life to come; and that, as a preparation for it, every gratification of the ſenſes is to be reſiſted and refuſed. They therefore either reject its doctrines and duties at once, as in-

laws of that religion. Had the precepts of Chriſtianity their full effect upon the minds and lives of men; all our diſquiſitions on the guilt or innocence of duelling would be ſuperſeded: for duelling itſelf muſt ceaſe. Were all men as upright and as benevolent, as revelation enjoins them to be, there would be neither injury nor reſentment, neither offence nor revenge.

admiſſible in themſelves, becauſe irreconcileable to the propenſities of nature; or, what proves in the end equally miſchievous, they poſtpone their attention to them to ſome more ſedate period of life; till habit unhappily produces the effects of infidelity; and they loſe; not only all reliſh for the immediate offices of religion; but too often all regard for its authority and its laws.

That our religion has ſometimes been thus repreſented, by its injudicious friends, or by its artful enemies, is indeed as true in point of fact, as, we truſt, the repreſentation is in itſelf unjuſt. Such opinions are ſupported by thoſe only, who have miſtaken the nature and tendency of revelation; or who wiſh to excite prejudices againſt it. They may perhaps be found in the diſquiſitions of the infidel; but cannot be traced in the pages of ſcripture: or they may have been heard in the tabernacle or conventicle; but are in no degree countenanced by our eſtabliſhed church. They have been drawn from the gloomy caverns of ſuperſtition; not derived from the celeſtial light of revelation.

It may be ſhewn, on one hand, that religion forbids only ſuch exceſſes, as our own reaſon muſt condemn; and on the other, that it actually improves and exalts every innocent and rational enjoyment.

The votary of intemperance offends as much againſt prudence and policy, as againſt good morals; he is as much his own enemy, as the enemy of religion. He generally ſoon impairs or deſtroys thoſe faculties, which were given to be the guide of his virtue, and the ſource of his beſt enjoyments. He waſtes his time, his fortune, and his health; which ought to have been employed in promoting the happineſs of his fellow-creatures; for the ſake of his own; and in repaying to others thoſe advantages, which every man has received. By that languor or diſeaſe, which is the conſtant effect of riot and exceſs, he ſoon renders himſelf incapable of the feſtivity he ſought; which temperance would have enabled him to continue; and, in conjunction with temperance, religion would not have denied. By the gradual depravation of all the powers both of body and mind, which licentiouſneſs never fails to produce,

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he becomes incapable of that purity and refinement, which reaſon, as well as religion, teaches us, are neceſſary to the true dignity and happineſs of our nature. Let it not then be made an objection to divine revelation; that it condemns what appears to be injurious alike to the individual, and to ſociety; and what indeed all, who have tried it, confeſs to have failed of its own object: and let it now be enquired; whether religion do not improve and exalt every innocent and rational enjoyment.

If we contemplate the conſtitution of the world and the courſe of nature, in conjunction with our own faculties of body and mind, we ſhall ſee abundant reaſon to conclude, that we were not intended for repining and ſorrow, but for ſatisfaction and contentment; not for ſullen ſubmiſſion to irreſiſtible authority; but for chearful obedience to laws, which, while they preſcribe our duty, direct us to happineſs.

The ſatisfying the ſimpleſt appetites of nature is attended with a high degree of pleaſure. The reſt, which after fatigue fits

us again for our duty; and the food, that repairs our ſtrength; are ſought not only becauſe they are neceſſary, but becauſe they are delightful. We deſire them for our pleaſure, without waiting to reflect upon their uſe.

The author of nature has made induſtry neceſſary to the acquiſition of almoſt every good; and induſtry often appears irkſome and painful. But in return its ſucceſs is always pleaſant. Such is the frame of our minds, that ſcarce any ſatisfaction is greater than that of obtaining by our own exertions the object of our purſuit: hardly any acquiſition is ſo much valued, as that which is the reward of our own diligence and ſkill *.

Of all the duties which men are required to perform, the parental ſeem to be attended

* It is obſervable, on the other hand, that all the malignant paſſions are painful to the breaſt which they inhabit; they are the natural tyrants of the mind, and equally deſtroy its purity and its quiet. But the humane and benevolent affections never fail to delight the heart, by which they are encouraged. They are the ſources, not more of our brighteſt virtues, than of our higheſt enjoyments.

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with the greateſt difficulty and anxiety: yet ſuch is the delight alſo attending them, that they are the laſt which any man is willing to relinquiſh; they do not more conſtitute the buſineſs of his life, than its pleaſure; they are as much his happineſs, as his virtue.

But independent and unconnected with any duties, nature preſents us with innumerable objects of delight; with ſtreams of pleaſure from a thouſand ſprings. The ſucceſſion of day and night, and the continual variation of the ſeaſons, are hardly more the cauſes of our induſtry, than of our amuſement. The general intercourſe with our fellow-creatures; the company of our friends, and our domeſtic attachments, are ſources of perpetual gratification. Nor muſt we forget, as well the more elegant and liberal arts, the productions of the poet, the muſician, and the painter, as the thouſand others, of inferior dignity perhaps, but not inferior uſe, that are daily adminiſtering to our wants, our conveniences, or our pleaſures. Such indeed is the conſtitution of our minds, that we ſoon learn to find gratification, not only where it might

might naturally be expected; but alſo in what ſhould ſeem more likely to pain our ſenſibility and depreſs our ſpirits; not only in the records of the improvement and happineſs of our fellow-creatures; but of their miſery or deſtruction; not only in the details of commerce, ſcience, and civilization; but in the narratives of war, of peſtilence, and famine. We delight to view, not only the palace of elegance and grandeur, and the landſcape ſmiling with flowers and fertility; but the ruins of the nobleſt edifice; the rock that has been rent by the thunder; and the ocean agitated by the tempeſt. It is alſo of importance to reflect, that the value of all theſe gratifications will be eſſentially enhanced, by the ſentiments with which they ought to be received; by our gratitude to him who gives them. It is true that much of the pleaſure we derive from theſe ſources is the effect of our own induſtry, our ingenuity, or our habits; but ſtill it muſt be conſidered as the bounty of our Creator. The author of nature, is the author of whatever good nature can produce; it is God that gives, whatever he has given us powers to obtain.

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The amuſements thus copiouſly placed before us, we ſhall not find prohibited by revelation. What God has given, his laws do not forbid us to enjoy. His laws do indeed preſcribe rules for our indulgence in the bounties of nature. But theſe rules are themſelves calculated and intended to ſecure and to improve the enjoyment. They preſcribe ſuch temperance in the indulgence of our ſenſes, as would continue our gratification, and ſecure our health; and ſuch command over tumultuous paſſions, as would guard the tranquillity of our own minds, and of thoſe about us. They enjoin ſuch integrity in our tranſactions, and ſuch humanity in our general conduct, as would quickly eſtabliſh our character, and effectually promote our intereſt; as would enſure the applauſe of our fellow-creatures, ſupported and enhanced by the approbation of our own conſcience. This then ſurely is the ſyſtem, above all others, that will preſerve the equanimity, which philoſophy in vain endeavoured to teach; and that chearfulneſs of heart, which is itſelf the beſt ingredient in every enjoyment of life. And what reaſon might teach us to expect from our religion, experience will

confirm:

confirm: for the trueſt content and ſatisfaction are always found with the humble, the innocent, and the pious.

In ſupport of theſe ſentiments may be adduced both the language of ſcripture, and the immediate duties of religion.—It is Solomon's opinion of wiſdom; that *her ways are ways of pleaſantneſs, and that all her paths are peace.* St. Paul calls upon his converts of Theſſalonica to *rejoice evermore.* And our Saviour himſelf performed his firſt miracle to encourage the hilarity of a feſtival. The immediate duties of religion, which revelation teaches, are calculated and intended to bring to the minds of all, except the guilty and impenitent, comfort and encouragement, hope and joy. The principal ceremonies of the Jewiſh ſervice were their ſolemn feſtivals, the feaſt of the dedication, or the feaſt of the paſſover; and in our own church, not only hymns of praiſe and thankſgiving form a part of our worſhip; but our ſabbath itſelf is conſidered as a feſtival.

From our religion, however, though every way friendly, in the preſent life, to its faithful followers, more muſt not be required than

the author of that religion has given us reaſon to expect. It will not viſibly alter the nature of things in their favour; nor confound the order eſtabliſhed in the world. It will not interfere with the relative ſituations of men in ſociety; by changing the circumſtances of the rich and poor, the humble and the exalted, the freeman and the ſlave. It will not exempt men from the caſualties naturally incident to humanity; from care, vexation, and diſappointment; from pain, ſickneſs, and death. It does not exclude, for it teaches us to expect, ſuch temporal calamities, as we believe providence to inflict; in order to reſtrain or correct the diſobedient; and to try and prove the faith and firmneſs of the juſt. It will not remove from men the ill effects of their former tranſgreſſions, upon their character, fortune, or health; it will not protect them from the fraud or violence of the wicked; nor exempt them from their ſhare in general and national diſtreſs.

But though there are caſes, in which our religion may fail compleatly to effect our temporal proſperity; or to effect it in the mode, which our wayward imaginations might deſire; yet will it ſtill perform what

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it profeſſes. It will alleviate the calamities, it does not prevent; and exalt the beſt enjoyments by *the hope of better things to come.*

Epicurus is celebrated by one of his diſciples *, as the great benefactor of his followers, the atheiſtical ſenſualiſts of antiquity, in having releaſed their minds from the fear of the gods; a ſentiment, which they conſidered, as a uſeleſs oppreſſion on their ſpirits, and a painful reſtraint upon their enjoyments. To the infidels of modern times the reality of this ſervice may be queſtioned; or its advantages denied. It has been maintained, with every appearance of truth, that no man of reflection can wholly diveſt himſelf of the belief of the exiſtence and providence of God; and conſequently that they, who make profeſſion of infidelity, own a conviction which they do not feel; and while they deny with their lips a future ſtate of reſponſibility, they not ſeldom confeſs it by their fears. Unbelievers, indeed, as is univerſally known, have often acknowledged that their guilty pleaſures were alloyed

* Lucret. lib. 6.

by involuntary apprehenſions of a judgment to come. In the hour of ſickneſs or ſolitude, in moments of reflection, or on the approach of death, they have doubted the truth of their former principles, or wholly retracted their infidelity. And it has from hence been concluded, that the boaſted ſervice of Epicurus never was performed.

The ſincerity of the profeſſions of the infidel, however, cannot in every inſtance be diſproved. Allowing him therefore the fulleſt conviction of the truth of his own tenets; let us enquire whether he can rationally claim thoſe advantages of ſuperior peace of mind, which the poet of atheiſm has ſo eloquently diſplayed. Inſtead of a Deity, let him ſuppoſe the univerſe to have been formed by atoms and chance; by fate and neceſſity: or by any other power, of whatever name or nature; the ſame power, that gave exiſtence to things in their preſent ſtate, may, in oppoſition to all the arguments of the atheiſt, give exiſtence alſo to a world to come. Whatever cauſe eſtabliſhed this chequered ſcene of good and evil, where vice and virtue, happineſs and miſery, are in ſome degree pro-

promiſcuouſly united; where *there is one event to the righteous and to the wicked*; the ſame cauſe may have ordained a future ſtate alſo of recompence and retribution; where all theſe irregularities ſhall be rectified, and reward and puniſhment diſtributed in exact proportion to merit or to guilt. On the principles of atheiſm, therefore, the apprehenſions of future reſponſibility for our conduct cannot with certainty, or even rationally, be removed.

With reſpect to the fear of temporal evil, infidelity ſurely gives no advantages. That human life is perpetually expoſed to vexation and diſappointment; that every man feels the want of ſome ſuperior power, on which he may rely, either to avert the evils that threaten him, or to ſupport him under them; I need not waſte time in proving; for it will not be denied. But if we believe theſe evils either to ariſe ſolely from chance and accident; or to be previouſly ordained by fate and neceſſity; our fears of them muſt be augmented, not diminiſhed: we are left without hope to avoid them; and without ſupport when they fall. The profeſſions of the infidel, then, are either the reſult of his own

conviction, or they are not. If the latter; they are empty and criminal oſtentation: and if the former, their natural tendency is to aggravate the evils, which it is pretended, they are calculated to remove.

Admit but, on the contrary, the exiſtence and providence of *the God of the Chriſtians*, and the reality of that *life and immortality*, which the goſpel *has brought to light*; and the inequalities of our preſent ſtate appear no longer unintelligible or inequitable; calamity is no longer without conſolation, nor death itſelf without hope. It is indeed the excluſive privilege of divine revelation, to explain the true cauſe of phyſical and moral evil; and to furniſh adequate motives to reſignation under them. It is the unrivalled glory of our religion, to have proclaimed the certainty of a life to come; where the due diſtinction ſhall be made between the righteous and the wicked; and every man recompenſed, *according to what he hath done in the body*. It is from faith in the goſpel of Chriſt, and from that only, that we can juſtly or rationally adopt the ſentiments and the language of the prophet; *although the fig-tree ſhall not bloſſom, neither*

neither ſhall fruit be in the vine; the labour of the olive ſhall fail, and the fields ſhall yield no meat; the flock ſhall be cut off from the fold, and there ſhall be no herd in the ſtalls; yet will we rejoice in the Lord, and joy in the God of our ſalvation.

5. There is one point more, in which the ſuitableneſs of the Chriſtian revelation to the preſent ſtate of human nature and human life, muſt not be overlooked; its adaption to our appetites and paſſions. How indeed a creature intended for trial and probation, for preſent exertion and future reſponſibility, could have been formed without paſſions, without deſires ſtimulating him to activity, and liable to exceſs, we are not able to conceive: and we therefore conſider thoſe paſſions as an important and eſſential part of human nature. Had then a religion been offered for our acceptance, which either omitted all attention to theſe paſſions, or commanded what was incompatible with their gratification and effects; which called upon us to guide our actions by motives, of which they did not form any part; or which required their total ſuppreſſion or extirpation;

to ſuch a religion we might, with great appearance of juſtice, have objected, as difficult to be believed and embraced; becauſe unſuitable to our nature and ſituation; or as impoſſible to have proceeded from our Creator; becauſe inconſiſtent with what he had already given. But the aim of the Chriſtian religion is, not to extinguiſh thoſe appetites, which the author of that religion implanted; but to direct them to their proper objects; to reſtrain their irregularities and exceſſes; and to indulge them as far as they are guiltleſs and uſeful. It is to gratify what were given in a ſtate of innocence, not what our corruption has introduced. Chriſtianity encourages all the benevolent and nobler propenſities of our nature: its obvious tendency is, to ripen inſtincts into morals; to graft virtues on the ſtock of the natural affections. A few examples, from ſome of the leading paſſions of the human heart, will illuſtrate what has been aſſerted, and, it is preſumed, eſtabliſh its truth.

The ſtrongeſt and moſt univerſal paſſion of the human mind is ſelf-love; ſo ſtrong and ſo univerſal indeed, that many able philoſophers

ſophers have maintained it to be our ſole motive and principle of action; and it is obvious that, in the common intercourſe of life, by this we expect every man to be guided. We depend upon him, whoſe intereſt we know it is, to act as we deſire. To this accordingly the precepts of divine revelation are addreſſed. It is for our own ſakes that we are required to perform the duties it enjoins. Obedience will be followed by reward, and tranſgreſſion by puniſhment. Here is no unmeaning declamation on the beauty of virtue, the fitneſs of things, or the authority of truth. But a direct and intelligible obligation: to purſue the path of duty; becauſe it leads to happineſs, which all men conſtantly deſire; and to ſhun the unhallowed tracks of vice; becauſe they terminate in miſery, the natural object of our terror and averſion.

Mixed with ſelf-love in the mind, we find the love of our fellow-creatures. And whether this be a native quality of the heart, or an acquired virtue, or both united, needs not now be a queſtion: its exiſtence and utility are all that the preſent purpoſe de-

mands. This the ſcripture calls charity; and St. Paul pronounces it to be *the greateſt of all virtues*. It is the principle from which proceeds whatever we applaud under the names of generoſity, benevolence, and humanity: and in perfect uniſon with the beſt ſentiments of the beſt men, revelation commands us *to love our neighbour as ourſelves*; and declares that *love to be the fulfilling of the law*.

In ſubſervience to our ſelf-love and ſocial, the motives of action, by which we are moſt powerfully influenced, are our hopes and fears; the hope of what we believe to be good, and the fear of the oppoſite evil; and to theſe all the precepts of Chriſtianity are immediately addreſſed. The prohibitions of the goſpel are with threats, and its *commandments with promiſe. The wicked ſhall go away into everlaſting puniſhment; but the righteous into life eternal.*

In the human mind the deſire of knowledge is univerſal and inſatiable; and the Chriſtian revelation, above every thing elſe, promiſes to gratify and indulge it. The im-

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perfection of ſcience, and the narrow limits of our information in the preſent life, are every where felt and confeſſed: and on theological ſubjects, more than on any other, *we now ſee through a glaſs darkly.* Nothing ſo much diſappoints the enquiries of curioſity; nothing ſo much humbles the aſpiring pride of reaſon; as the attributes of the Deity, and the myſteries of our redemption. But we are taught to hope, that in the future ſtate of our exiſtence our faculties will be enlarged, as well as purified; and that we ſhall be enabled and permitted to underſtand many of thoſe appearances in the government of the world, which at preſent moſt perplex us. One of the rewards of our duty will be the gratification of our love of knowledge. And we cannot doubt but all the proceedings of providence, when fully underſtood, will appear as equitable, as they now ſeem irregular; and that we ſhall have as much cauſe to admire their wiſdom and conſiſtency, as to adore their juſtice and benevolence. *Hereafter*, the apoſtle has aſſured us, *we ſhall know, even as we are known*; and that *eye hath not ſeen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man,*

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the things which God hath prepared for them that love him.

Another powerful paſſion of the human mind is ambition, the love of honour and diſtinction: and this too is expreſsly encouraged by divine revelation. But it is directed to its proper object, and confined within due bounds. It is directed, not like the pride and vanity of the world, to the temporal and perſonal aggrandiſement of the individual, at the expence of his fellow-creatures; not to their deſtruction in war, or their ſubjection to his power; in order to obtain for him the ſhouts of the multitude, or the gratification of criminal deſire*: but it is directed to the imitation of him, by whom it was implanted; to benevolence and beneficence; to the promotion of peace, virtue, and happineſs amongſt his fellow-creatures;

* "Let not the wiſe man glory in his wiſdom; neither let the mighty man glory in his might; let not the rich man glory in his riches. But let him that glorieth, glory in this; that he underſtandeth and knoweth me; that I am the Lord, which exerciſe loving-kindneſs, judgment, and righteouſneſs in the earth: for in theſe things I delight, ſaith the Lord." Jerem. ix. 23, 24.

in order to obtain the favour of his Creator, and by *patient continuance in well-doing, glory, and honour, and immortality.* To ſtimulate us to our beſt exertions, we are aſſured, that *in our father's houſe are many manſions*; where our rank in glory will be in proportion to the improvement of our talents: according to our conduct ſhall we receive *a prophet's, or a righteous man's, reward:* according to our deſert, ſhall we be *the greateſt or the leaſt in the kingdom of heaven**.

* It will, no doubt, be obſerved by the philoſopher, or the ſcorner, that no notice has been taken of a paſſion, which is not only among the moſt univerſal and powerful, but which has more influence on morality, and occaſions more diſturbance in ſociety, than almoſt any other; the paſſion by which the ſpecies is continued. To this the anſwer is not difficult. Of this paſſion the records of revelation every where ſuppoſe the indulgence; within ſuch limits as may not corrupt our own hearts, injure our neighbour, or violate the laws of the ſociety in which we live. No proviſion is indeed made for it in the life to come: becauſe its whole purpoſe being attained here, we ſuppoſe that hereafter it will have no exiſtence. As if purpoſely to guard againſt ſuch an objection, the petulant Sadduces were told that, *in the reſurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage; but are as the angels of God in heaven.* Matt. xxii. 30.

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If then there be any truth in the ſtatement that has been given; if the tendency of the Chriſtian revelation be to promote the comfort and ſatisfaction, as well as the virtue, of mankind in their preſent ſtate; to excite chearfulneſs and hope, not dejection and terror, in the human mind; if inſtead of a perpetual war with all our paſſions and propenſities, it teach us only to correct what is exceſſive and pernicious, in order more fully to gratify what is innocent and uſeful; if there be this admirable conformity between our intereſts and our duty; between the purſuit of preſent and of future happineſs; between the internal frame of our minds and our external condition; between the book of nature and the word of God; upon theſe grounds we ſhould build, not ſurely an objection to the authenticity of this revelation, but an argument in favour of its credibility; not a reluctance to its authority, but a recommendation of its utility. Our own deductions ſhould lead us to conclude, with the dictate of the apoſtle; that *godlineſs is profitable unto all things; having the promiſe of the life that now is, and of that which is to come.*

SERMON

SERMON V.

ON THE MYSTERIOUS DOCTRINES OF CHRISTIANITY.

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2 PET. III. 16.

In which are ſome things hard to be underſtood.

ONE of the moſt intereſting, and yet one of the moſt difficult, ſubjects, on which human reaſon can be employed, is its own nature, its powers, and its duties. Its extent and its limitations, what it is able to effect, and what it ought not to attempt, are not, and probably cannot be, preciſely defined. In many of our reſearches we feel its weakneſs at every ſtep; and yet we advance in the confidence of its ſtrength. We daily ſee the fallibility of thoſe who have gone before us; and we often cenſure their errors

errors and their preſumption; yet we continue to require from others, or to hope to obtain by our own efforts, demonſtration and certainty on ſubjects, where perhaps probability or teſtimony only ought to be expected. In many branches of art and ſcience, indeed, the acquiſitions already made encourage us to proceed in purſuit of ſtill further diſcoveries; and the means of aſcertaining the truth are ſo much within our reach, or within our hopes, that it ſeems fair to demand ſcientific proof, before any new theory is admitted; or to with-hold our aſſent, till unqueſtionable evidence is produced. But in one important point reaſon has been equally confident of her own ſtrength; where her confidence was leſs juſtifiable, or leſs judicious. In the caſe of divine revelation ſhe has made her own ſuppoſed powers an objection to her faith; and refuſed to receive ſuch truths as ſhe could not fully underſtand.

It has been urged, not only againſt the church of England, but againſt Chriſtianity itſelf, that many of its peculiar doctrines are too abſtruſe and myſterious; not level to the capacities

capacities of thoſe for whoſe inſtruction it profeſſes itſelf to be intended; that they are incomprehenſible, and therefore incredible. Admitting, ſay the objectors, that human reaſon was not able to teach men their duty, and *to make them wiſe unto ſalvation*; and that conſequently ſupernatural aſſiſtance was neceſſary; how are we to receive that as a divine revelation, which oppoſes to the very faculties, by which alone we can judge of its nature and authenticity, myſteries that perplex them, and difficulties, which they cannot ſurmount. By our reaſon only can we interpret the meaning of this ſuppoſed revelation, or apply it to the regulation of our ſentiments and conduct; yet many of its truths are confeſſedly ſuch as reaſon cannot explain. Surely, ſay they, a God of wiſdom and goodneſs would have made that eaſy, which was ſo valuable; if it was neceſſary to all, the knowledge of it ſhould have been by all attainable. Surely, if God created man, and gave him a revelation, he would have adapted the one to the other; he would either have lowered the doctrines to our capacities; or enlarged our capacities to comprehend the doctrines. It is aſſerted too,

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that theſe myſteries have not been favourable, but prejudicial, to piety and good morals; that they have deterred many from embracing Chriſtianity itſelf; and that amongſt its followers and its advocates they have occaſioned difference of opinion and controverſy; and conſequently have interrupted the peace and diminiſhed the charity, which it is one profeſſed object of the goſpel to promote. The objectors, therefore, are led to conclude; either that the Deity has given no ſuch revelation, as we conceive it to be our duty to teach; or that he has given it, as well adapted to our faculties, as worthy of himſelf; as clear and intelligible, as it is valuable and neceſſary: they conclude that all the myſteries we complain of, are the comments and gloſſes of human reaſon; either the unfortunate miſtakes of ignorance and ſuperſtition, or the intereſted devices of policy and power.

Such was the objection of the Epicurean philoſopher*, while Chriſtianity was yet in its infancy; ſuch has continually been the objection of the ſceptic and the infidel; and

* Celſus apud Orig.

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ſuch is ſtill one objection of a numerous deſcription of ſeparatiſts from our national church.

In the attempt to invalidate this objection it will not be pretended, that theſe myſterious doctrines do not exiſt in our religion; or that any new and clearer interpretation of them is to be produced. It is intended only to offer ſome conſiderations to ſhew, that myſtery is conſiſtent with credibility; that what is not, or cannot be, the object of our ſenſes, or the proper ſubject of ſcience, may yet be reaſonably an article of religious belief.

It is hardly neceſſary to add, that by myſteries I wiſh to be underſtood all thoſe doctrines of our church, which have been uſually known by the term: ſuch, for example, as the doctrine of the Holy Trinity; of the union of the divine and human nature in the perſon of Chriſt; and of the operations of the holy ſpirit: all thoſe, in ſhort, the abſtruſeneſs of which has at any time been alledged; either by the ſectary, as the cauſe of his diſſenting from the eccleſiaſtical eſtabliſhment of his country; or by the ſceptic,

as one reaſon for his doubting or denying the divine origin of our religion; either by thoſe, who are diſpoſed to adopt a Chriſtianity with fewer myſteries and difficulties; or by thoſe, who, in their zeal for the powers of reaſon, and the rejection of myſteries, have been led to reject divine revelation itſelf.

1. That there are myſterious doctrines in our religion; that it *contains*, if we may be allowed to apply the words of the apoſtle to our preſent purpoſe, *ſome things hard to be underſtood*, is readily admitted. It cannot, and need not, be denied. Such doctrines were not only naturally to be expected, but clearly unavoidable, in a divine revelation; and therefore do not invalidate their own truth or credibility. Whatever declares or implies the phyſical attributes of the Deity, muſt be above the comprehenſion of the human mind.

All our ideas of ſpirit are negative, and therefore obſcure. When we attempt to form a notion of a ſpiritual ſubſtance ourſelves, or to explain it to others, we do not

deſcribe

deſcribe ſo much what it is, as what it is not; we do not combine the properties of things we already know, but exclude the properties of every thing elſe. All our ideas on the ſubject, therefore, are confuſed and indefinite; incapable of preciſion, demonſtration, or certainty. And ſuch as our ideas of ſpirit are, ſuch muſt be our ideas of its operations. We know not how ſpirit acts upon ſpirit, or upon matter, or how matter acts upon ſpirit. In whatever therefore the agency of ſpirit is concerned, there will inevitably be ſome degree of obſcurity. And this obſcurity will be encreaſed by an unavoidable deficiency in our language. What is imperfectly conceived, will always be imperfectly expreſſed. And language borrowed from material objects, as all language evidently has been, will but inadequately deſcribe ſpirit and its operations. In all diſquiſitions, therefore, upon ſuch points, ambiguities will neceſſarily ariſe; obſcurity cannot be avoided. Theſe conſiderations alone are ſufficient to ſhew that thoſe doctrines of our religion, which are thought moſt myſterious, are not therefore incredible; and that all the arguments drawn by compariſon and analogy from material

objects, to prove certain articles of our creed abſurd and contradictory, are inconcluſive and fallacious. The properties of matter and ſpirit are ſo different, that what is true of the former, is not therefore neceſſarily true of the latter; and inferences from each, inſtead of being the ſame, may be not only very different, but the very reverſe of one another. Theſe obſervations are not deſigned to encourage a general ſcepticiſm reſpecting ſpirit and its operations; but to deprive our adverſaries of an argument, in which they ſometimes triumph. They relate only to the phyſical properties of ſpirit; with which no man pretends to be fully acquainted. Its moral attributes and principles muſt be analogous to our own; or they cannot concern us.

2. Myſterious doctrines again are inſeparable from ſuch a revelation, as we believe to have been given; not only as it muſt involve the ſpiritual nature and phyſical properties of the Deity, which all allow to be incomprehenſible; but as it aſſerts, what leads to conſequences little leſs perplexing, his moral attributes, his providence, and our redemp-

redemption. It does not treat ſimply of our duties to each other, of tranſactions between man and man; but of the connection between man and his God; of our creation by his power, our obedience to his laws, and our dependence upon his bounty and protection. It not only enjoins the due government of our paſſions, and points out the true path to happineſs in the preſent life; but announces to us new and ſublimer objects of our hopes and fears, the rewards and puniſhments of futurity according to our merits or our offences. It informs us, not only how man fell from a ſtate of innocence by tranſgreſſion, and became unable to deſerve or to obtain the favour of his maker; but of the wonderful and merciful means by which that favour may be recovered; of the incarnation of the only Son of God; and his being made the propitiation for our ſins; of our juſtification by faith and repentance; and our ſanctification by the holy ſpirit. It aſſures us, not only that we have ſouls intended and fitted for immortality; but that there ſhall be alſo a reſurrection of theſe periſhable bodies; that the preſent union of matter and ſpirit in the conſtitution of human nature

ſhall indeed ſuffer a temporary interruption in the grave; but that it ſhall hereafter be reſtored in a ſtate exempt from end or change. Theſe topicks of themſelves preſent difficulties as numerous as they are unavoidable; and we have multiplied and aggravated them by endeavouring to become *wiſe above what is written*; by attempting to underſtand what ſcripture has left in obſcurity; and to explain to others what neither we have faculties to explain, nor they to comprehend. On ſubjects ſo extraordinary, ſo difficult, and ſo intereſting, indeed, curioſity muſt neceſſarily be excited; and we cannot wonder that men have frequently attempted by various modes of illuſtration to render that eaſy of belief, which it is our duty to believe; to reconcile that to our reaſon, to which the aſſent of reaſon is required. But of theſe attempts the ſucceſs, however conſiderable, can never be complete; and the advantage to religion and virtue, if not queſtionable in itſelf, is certainly not without alloy. If they have been productive of good, they have alſo been attended with evil; if they have often brought conviction to the friends of religion; they have ſometimes excited in its enemies

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ridicule or diſguſt. The proper enquiry is, not whether ſuch doctrines can be minutely explained, but whether they can reaſonably be believed; whether, though they cannot be objects of ſcience, they may not become articles of faith.

3. In order to aſcertain this, the firſt and great enquiry will be, whether they are in their own nature poſſible. We are not to conſider the credibility of the doctrines of revelation as on a level with the credibility of ordinary or general information. It ſtands upon a principle of its own. In peruſing the narrative of any tranſaction we calculate the probability of its truth, upon a ſcale proportioned to the power and diſpoſition of the agent. In the hiſtory of human affairs we admit that to be probable, which men like ourſelves are able to perform; and we believe it upon ordinary evidence: we carry our belief to extraordinary points only when the abilities of the man, or the force of teſtimony, correſpond to the nature of the facts. But in the proceedings of providence we do not conſider any thing as incredible in itſelf, which does not imply either a phyſical im-

poſſibility, or a violation of his moral attributes. We do not conceive it poſſible for omnipotence itſelf to make a part equal to the whole; or to cauſe the ſame proportion to be at once true and falſe; and we ſhould deem it impiety to ſuppoſe that he would violate thoſe diſtinctions between right and wrong, which he has himſelf eſtabliſhed; that he would puniſh obedience, or reward tranſgreſſion. But within theſe limits we conſider *all things as poſſible with God*; and therefore as credible, whenever ſufficient evidence is produced, that the ſuppoſed effects of his power really proceeded from it, and that what claims to be his word, can juſtly plead his authority. It is upon theſe grounds that good and wiſe men have believed, and conceived themſelves bound to believe, the reality of miracles and the truth of myſteries; and to depend upon the full accompliſhment of all the threats and promiſes of the goſpel.

4. If then the myſterious doctrines of our religion cannot be ſhewn to be phyſically impoſſible, they are not in their own nature incredible: they may be believed, on the

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ſame principle that we believe any thing elſe, when ſatisfactory evidence of the points in queſtion is produced. This is indeed the natural and proper foundation of faith. By our ſenſes we obtain certainty; by demonſtration, knowledge; but faith, by teſtimony. By far the greater part of what we generally call our knowledge, we have received upon evidence alone. All our belief in hiſtory is founded upon our opinion of the veracity of the hiſtorian: all our acquaintance with countries we have not viſited, depends upon the confidence we repoſe in the narrative of the traveller: in the ſtudy of the productions of nature we truſt to the experiments and the concluſions of our fellow-ſtudents; and even in mathematical ſcience we reſt a conſiderable portion of our knowledge on the axioms and demonſtrations of thoſe who have gone before us. Every thing, in ſhort, which we have not acquired by our own perſonal inveſtigation, is received upon evidence alone. And this is not more true in point of fact; than it is neceſſary from the conſtitution of the world. Were we, even in temporal concerns, to truſt ſolely to our own obſervation and experience,

rience, our ſtock of knowledge would not only be ſmall and of little value, but always imperfect and incomplete: life would be loſt, before knowledge, ſufficient for the purpoſes of life, could poſſibly be obtained. Why then ſhould not evidence be admitted as a proper ground of faith in the truths of religion, as well as of ſcience! of confidence in the word of God, as well as in the veracity of man! Why ſhould we complain that the Almighty has made the ſame principle the baſis of moral duty, which is the general baſis of the tranſactions of daily life!

It is true that ſome of the doctrines of Chriſtianity are *hard to be underſtood*; and it ought therefore to be ſupported by teſtimony proportioned to the difficulties it contains. It is true that this ſuppoſed revelation is a point of all others the moſt important to us; and may therefore reaſonably be expected to be furniſhed with evidence of its own authenticity the moſt deciſive and unqueſtionable. And this upon enquiry will be found to be the caſe. Let the prophecies of ſcripture be viewed in their ſeries, their conſiſtency, and their completion; let the

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reputed miracles be conſidered in their number, their notoriety, and their witneſſes; let the morality of the goſpel be examined in its ſuperiority over every other ſyſtem of ethics, and in its adaptation to the nature and ſituation of mankind; let the records of each be compared in their probable authenticity, with the records of any other tranſactions equally diſtant from us in time and place; and theſe objects united will form ſuch a body and weight of evidence, as, whilſt it is not required in any other caſe, can certainly in no other caſe be obtained. The preſent purpoſe, however, is not to diſcuſs the evidences of revelation, but to ſtate as a general principle; that teſtimony may be a ſufficient ground of belief in truths which we cannot demonſtrate, or in facts, which we cannot explain; that the evidence of Chriſtianity is the natural foundation of Chriſtian faith.

In religion, however, it concerns us to remember, that our faith muſt not ſtop at the ſimple act of the underſtanding. To believe the truths of Chriſtianity, as we believe the ordinary truths of hiſtory and ſcience,

ſcience, is not what our Creator has promiſed to accept and reward. In the common tranſactions of life, what we believe generally influences our conduct: our opinions, ſtimulated by our paſſions, are the foundations of our actions: and in religion ſuch a faith is required, as may prompt to exertion; as may teach us not only to believe in God, but to love and fear him; as may animate our affections, while it regulates them, and become the motive of action, and the principle of duty. The tree is known and eſtimated only by its fruits. Our virtues have merit and value only when exerted as acts of obedience to the commands of God. The language of religion itſelf is, that we muſt *ſhew our faith by our works; becauſe that faith without works is dead.*

5. Before we reject revelation on account of its myſterious doctrines, let us recollect, that our information muſt ſomewhere terminate. Were the myſteries, which now perplex us, explained; others would be brought within our view. As we advanced in the knowledge of the Almighty and his proceedings, new wonders and new difficulties

ties would ſucceſſively ariſe; and freſh curioſity be excited, as the firſt was gratified. In human ſcience one diſcovery does little elſe than produce the deſire of more. The ſtudent of nature may proceed one ſtep further than his fellows; he may demonſtrate that what is uſually deemed the cauſe of any viſible effect, is itſelf but the effect of a cauſe more general and remote. But he ſtill finds his acquiſitions incomplete and unſatisfactory. The more he knows, the more he perceives to be ſtill unknown. Thus would it be with reſpect to the doctrines of Chriſtianity. Were the veil removed from what is at preſent concealed, it would but ſhew us another veil concealing other myſteries; and we might ſtill complain that our religion was burthened with difficulties; that we were ſtill required to believe, what we were not permitted to underſtand. How far ſoever we might be allowed to proceed, we muſt at laſt arrive at the point, where our faculties would fail us; where more intelligence could not be given, becauſe we have not capacity to receive it. At this point, it is poſſible, we may be already arrived. Omniſcience, however, we apprehend, cannot be conferred upon

upon us, or upon any other creature; and the Almighty is the proper judge; not only of what degree of information we are capable of receiving; but of what is the fitteſt and beſt for us: and we cannot doubt but that his wiſdom and goodneſs will as certainly grant what is uſeful and beneficial, as that he will with-hold what would be unprofitable or prejudicial.

As an additional reaſon for acquieſcing in theſe myſteries we ſhould recollect, that revelation, with all its bleſſings, as well as its information, is a favour ſpontaneouſly beſtowed, not a debt that we could have claimed; we owe it, not to any merit of our own, but to the bounty of its author. Our duty therefore obviouſly is gratitude and reſignation; to be thankful for what has been given; and not to murmur at what has been denied.

6. It may reconcile us ſtill further to the myſteries in our religion to reflect that there are myſteries equally great in almoſt every thing around us. Not a ſubject can be named, which the human mind can be ſaid fully

fully to underſtand. How little we know of ſpirit and its operations has been already obſerved; and we do not know much more of matter and its qualities. To a few of its exterior properties we have indeed given names and deſcriptions. We meaſure its bulk, delineate its form, and denominate its colour: but we cannot penetrate beyond its ſurface. Of the operations of nature we ſee the effects, and can often ſucceſsfully inveſtigate the immediate cauſes. But how theſe effects are produced, or why each ſhould follow from any given cauſe, we are wholly unable to diſcover. By what proceſs the acorn becomes an oak; by what laws the rain falls, and the tempeſt rages, we are as ignorant, as we are of the nature and eſſence of the Deity. Man is indeed a myſtery to himſelf. Who can tell what or where is the principle of life within him? who can account for the origin or the effects of his own will? It were as eaſy to illuſtrate the moſt obnoxious doctrine of our religion, as to explain by what power we direct the eye to its object, or guide the hand in its operations.

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It is remarked by Origen, that if the ſcriptures be ſuppoſed to proceed from him who made the world, we may reaſonably expect to find as great difficulties in them, as are found in the conſtitution and courſe of nature. And it cannot be ſhewn to be either more neceſſary, or more poſſible, for us, in our preſent ſtate, to comprehend all the doctrines of the Chriſtian revelation, than to underſtand all the truths of natural philoſophy.

Of the phenomena of nature we have, indeed, the evidence of our own ſenſes; and therefore cannot doubt their reality. But for the truth of the myſterious doctrines of our religion, becauſe for the truth of the religion itſelf, we have only the teſtimony of thoſe who were appointed to be its witneſſes; and therefore can obtain only belief. But the principle under conſideration is common to both. In each we admit the truth of what we do not underſtand.

7. It is yet further to be remarked with reſpect to what we term myſteries in our religion; that they are ſuch only with refe-

rence to our underſtanding. To us that is difficult, which we cannot perfom; that may be conſidered as myſterious, which we cannot comprehend. But the myſtery and the difficulty are not abſolute, but relative. To an infant every appearance of nature, and every performance of art, were he diſpoſed to examine them, would be abſtruſe and incomprehenſible. To a mind more mature, if unimproved by literature and ſcience, a few ſuperficial facts may be known; but cauſes and principles are beyond its reach and its capacity. The philoſopher penetrates a little farther; and many things are clear to him, which to mankind in general are unintelligible, and almoſt incredible. But his enquiries ſoon find the boundaries which they cannot paſs. By angels and ſpirits we may reaſonably ſuppoſe ſtill more is underſtood. Yet we cannot doubt but even to them are oppoſed new myſteries and difficulties; depths, which they cannot fathom; clouds and darkneſs, through which they are not permitted to penetrate. We too, in our future ſtate of exiſtence, ſhall probably be allowed to acquire much higher degrees of information, than we now poſſeſs. If we

attain to the reſurrection of the juſt, our faculties, we have reaſon to believe, will be enlarged as well as purified; and what now ſeems moſt myſterious in our religion, may appear, as no doubt it is, equally juſt, benevolent, and wiſe. Part of the happineſs of the bleſſed may conſiſt in a perpetual progreſs in knowledge and purity; in a continual approximation to the fountain of wiſdom and perfection. *We now ſee through a glaſs darkly, and know in part; but then ſhall we know, even as we are known.* Inſtead then of murmuring at myſteries; inſtead of rejecting Chriſtianity, becauſe they form a part of it; we ſhould recollect, that it is only our curioſity that is diſappointed; our vanity that is mortified. It is not ſo much that doctrines are difficult, as that we are weak and unreaſonable: and our complaints do not ſo much make an objection to the credibility of revelation, as an imputation to the wiſdom or goodneſs of our Creator, for not having endowed us with more enlarged capacities.

8. It ought again to be a ſource of ſatisfaction to us, with reſpect to the myſterious doctrines

doctrines of our religion, that we are not required to underſtand them. Reaſon is not, and cannot be, called upon to comprehend, what the author of reaſon has placed out of its reach. Our buſineſs is not ſo much with their explication, as their authenticity. It is our duty to enquire diligently whether they are contained in ſcripture: to conſider them rather as queſtions of fact, than of ſcience; whether, according to the rules of ſound criticiſm, they are, or are not, the doctrines of divine revelation. If not, we cannot be under any obligation to receive them: but if they are, our duty is belief and acquieſcence. By this means every man will be enabled to give the beſt poſſible reaſon for the faith or hope that is in him, the authority of the word of God. In order to reconcile theſe myſteries to our own minds, or the minds of others; in order to facilitate and extend the belief of Chriſtianity; we endeavour to clear its difficulties, to ſhew the poſſibility, and therefore the credibility, of the doctrines we profeſs; preſuming that ſuch diſquiſitions are innocent, and hoping they may be uſeful. But where our inveſtigations cannot advance; our faith does not

neceſſarily ſtop. We may believe the general truth, though we are not able to illuſtrate it in detail. Nor are we bound by the alternative, either to adopt a ſpecific illuſtration, or wholly to reject the doctrine. Some latitude of interpretation muſt be allowed, on account of the abſtruſe nature of certain tenets of our religion, and our different degrees of intellect; for the intereſts of Chriſtianity, and the tranquillity of the public. On this ground it is that in her articles of faith, and in her interpretation of points of doctrine, our church has uſually employed very temperate and cautious language; very general and comprehenſive terms. And this moderation is equally juſt and wiſe. Where points of faith are unneceſſarily multiplied by detail, or limited by explanation, the ſources of diſcord are multiplied in the ſame proportion: and what ſhould have been directed to the promotion of union, inevitably augments the cauſes of ſeparation. But with a reaſonable and moderate, not to ſay, unavoidable, latitude, we hope the profeſſors of the doctrines of our eſtabliſhment may be encreaſed in their numbers, without being diminiſhed in the unity

of their faith; that they may live in the practice of charity towards each other, and in the hope of acceptance from their redeemer and judge.

9. It is well worthy of remark that of thoſe, who object to the myſterious doctrines of our eſtabliſhment, a large proportion conſiſts of men, who content themſelves with very lax and unſettled notions of Chriſtianity in general; of men, who are attached to religion chiefly from motives of policy; who are ſenſible of its advantages to civil ſociety; and therefore would in almoſt every country profeſs the eſtabliſhed faith. Of theſe men a few confeſs that they eſteem all religions equally good; as equally tending to ſecure decency and integrity of conduct, and the ſubjection and peace of the people. But the greater number prefer the Chriſtian religion; becauſe it teaches the pureſt morality, and enforces it by the moſt powerful ſanctions. But they do not examine with care its evidence, its doctrines, or its duties. The ideas of a Creator, a providence, and a ſtate of retribution, while merely general and ſuperficial, have little myſtery or difficulty; and

theſe men do not enter into a more minute inveſtigation of their creed. But let an attempt be made to reduce theſe doctrines, and what will fairly and unavoidably follow from them, into ſpecific and definite propoſitions; to explain them in detail; to reconcile them to the phenomena of nature, to the preſent ſtate of men and morals, and to the acknowledged attributes of the Deity; and they will preſent difficulties not much leſs formidable than the moſt obnoxious in our articles of faith. In men of this deſcription, then, it is not reaſonable or candid to object to the credibility of myſteries, merely as ſuch; to exclude from their ſyſtem of belief, whatever they cannot comprehend.

10. It muſt be yet further obſerved, that they who determine not to believe in Chriſtianity what they cannot comprehend, muſt reject what we conceive to be amongſt its moſt valuable doctrines; ſeveral of thoſe, indeed, which conſtitute not only its ſuperiority over all other religions, but its very nature and eſſence; which tend moſt to eſtabliſh its divine original, and even its importance to the ſalvation of mankind. Such men

men will exclude from their creed, for example, not only the myſtery of the Holy Trinity, and of all divinity in the perſon of the redeemer; but even the important and eſſential doctrines alſo of atonement and grace. And if Chriſtianity be once reduced by theſe means to the ſtandard of our reaſon; if it be ſtripped of all that is ſupernatural and myſterious; it will become more difficult to maintain its derivation from heaven; becauſe it will be difficult to find in it any uſe, character, or value, worthy of ſuch an origin. It will then, indeed, be ſo much on the ſame ſcale with other inſtitutions; and our Saviour will ſtand ſo much on a level with other teachers; that his dignity and his offices will be nearly loſt; his claims to our admiration and gratitude will want their ſupport; and moſt of the great purpoſes, for which he came into the world, rendered doubtful and ſuſpicious.

11. Revelation would then indeed become liable to objections of a different kind. The ſame men, who profeſs to reject Chriſtianity ſolely on account of its myſterious doctrines, would probably be among the firſt to reject

it, were no ſuch doctrines found in the ſyſtem: and alledge that too as the ground of their rejection. Were it poſſible that revelation could have been rendered in every reſpect level to our capacities; and were all its doctrines intelligible to our underſtandings; ſuch men would be among the firſt to tell us, there was nothing in it worthy the interpoſition of the great Creator; nothing that bore the ſtamp and image of divinity; nothing but what it was credible and probable reaſon had invented; becauſe nothing but what ſhe was able to invent. Why refer us to heaven, they would ſay, for what could be effected upon earth? why ſuppoſe that to be the work of God, which might be the work of man? If our Saviour had only taught a ſyſtem of morality ſomewhat better than had been taught before; or enforced it by ſanctions a little more ingenious or powerful; it might have been allowed that he was indeed ſuperior to every other human being; but not therefore more than human; that he had improved upon Solon or Socrates; but was not therefore a teacher come from God. Had his doctrines contained nothing more myſterious, than the properties of the tri-

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angle, or the beauties of the Iliad; we ſhould have been told that the truth of all this was credible without a prophecy or a miracle; credible, though no one *came down from heaven*, or *roſe from the dead*.

In this objection, indeed, there would have been conſiderable weight. It might not have been eaſy to maintain that to be divine, which bore hardly any characteriſtic of divinity; that to be ſupernatural, to the production of which human nature was equal. The excellence of its morality will not alone prove the divine origin of the goſpel. But we now find the caſe to be, what might reaſonably have been expected. Revelation ſhews every where the traces of its author. It teaches plainly, what it is at preſent neceſſary for us to underſtand, and what human wiſdom had never taught. But every thing beyond this, is beyond our comprehenſion. Our dependence, and our obligations, the rules of our conduct, and the terms of our ſalvation, are explicitly revealed. But the exiſtence, the perfections, and the government of God, though every where aſſerted or recogniſed, are no where minutely explained.

plained. In the nature of the human ſoul we are not inſtructed; but what is enough for us to know, we are aſſured, that he who made it, made it for immortality. In the diſcharge of our duty we are promiſed, what is ſufficient to ſtimulate our exertions and perſeverance, the aſſiſtance of the holy ſpirit; but of the nature and degree of that aſſiſtance we are not informed. If we are to be brought to judgment for our thoughts, as well as our actions, for our faith, as well as our works, it is by him, *who ſearcheth the heart, and ſeeth in ſecret.* If atonement be made for our offences againſt the Almighty; it is by a ſacrifice of adequate value, the ſacrifice of the ſon of God.

12. It may yet further reconcile us to the myſteries of our religion, if we conſider, that we ſhall be under the neceſſity of believing points equally myſterious, if we reject it. Let revelation be abandoned; and the theories of the atheiſt or the Deiſt muſt be adopted. If we embrace the cheerleſs ſyſtem of the former; and deny not only the revelation, but the exiſtence, of the Supreme Being; we ſhall ſoon find ourſelves obliged

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to digeſt tenets as incomprehenſible, as any articles of the Chriſtian faith. The atheiſt believes the exiſtence of the world without a Creator. If then he maintain, with one ſect of philoſophers, that it has continued from everlaſting in nearly its preſent ſtate; he believes that a perpetual ſucceſſion of cauſes came into operation, without any firſt cauſe to give them exiſtence and efficacy; and that arts and ſciences, which are in continual progreſs, will attain in time to that excellence or perfection, to which they have not attained in eternity. If, with another ſect of philoſophers, he maintain that things came in time into their preſent form and order; he believes that all the marks of ſkill and deſign in the formation of the univerſe, the exquiſite adaptation of every thing to its proper purpoſe, are purely accidental; that all the effects of wiſdom may be produced without its exiſtence; and that chance was once able to give birth to all theſe wonders; though it appears to have done nothing ever ſince. With theſe and other difficulties, ſo great and numerous, may the atheiſt be preſſed; and the belief of them would be ſo unreaſonable and unphiloſophical; that it has

has been doubted whether the character really ever exiſted; and it is certain that very few have ever openly avowed it.

If, with the Deiſt, we admit a Creator, but deny a divine revelation; we ſhall again find ourſelves entangled in inextricable perplexity. In the belief of a God, we believe little that we can comprehend, beyond the ſimple fact of his exiſtence. Of a Being that had no beginning, and can have no end; of a Being that was not cauſed by any thing, and yet is himſelf the cauſe of every thing; of a Being that is preſent at all times, and in all places, and yet has no relation to time or place; of a Being, who cannot do evil, and yet is morally free; of ſuch a Being we can form no definite conception; his nature and attributes the Deiſt is as unable to explain; as we are to illuſtrate the moſt myſterious articles in our creed. If the Deiſt believe that God created the world and immediately diſmiſſed it from his care; that he gave to millions of living creature a capacity of pleaſure and pain, but left their gratification to time and chance; that he ſuffers phyſical evil to deform his work, and moral

moral corruption to debaſe it; then muſt he believe a Deity without moral attributes; a Deity with imperfections of power or of inclination. If again the Deiſt believe that the whole ſyſtem of Judaiſm and Chriſtianity is error and deception; that the lawgiver of the Hebrews and the ſuppoſed redeemer of the world have been able to impoſe on ſo large a portion of mankind, in the belief of their miſſion, their powers, and their doctrines; if he believe that all the phenomena of nature, which appear to confirm the truth of revelation, have been miſtaken and miſapplied; he ſurely holds opinions and tenets not leſs extraordinary and inexplicable, than thoſe which he would reject as incredible. If the diſciples of atheiſm and of deiſm do really believe all to which their principles fairly and inevitably lead, they ſurely have no reaſon to deride the profeſſors of Chriſtianity for too much facility in their belief; for admitting doctrines to be true, which cannot be ſcientifically explained: they cannot with any appearance of juſtice complain, if we retort their own charge upon them; and continue to aſſert the bigotry of a ſceptic, and the credulity of an infidel.

13. It

13. It may now perhaps be objected, that by the principle and tendency of theſe obſervations reaſon is depreſſed and degraded; that ſhe is deprived of her peculiar prerogative, to examine, determine, and direct; and reduced to the meaner office of ſubmiſſion and obedience; that ſhe is made no longer the judge of the truth, but the ſlave of authority.

In the courſe of the diſquiſition the proper province of reaſon has in ſeveral points been defined or ſuggeſted; and a very few words more will ſuffice to ſhew that, in conjunction with revelation, ſhe has ſtill a very important taſk to perform; a taſk well ſuited to her nature and her powers; a taſk appointed by her Creator, and to which he ſeems to have intended ſhe ſhould be confined.

It is the buſineſs of reaſon to ſet before us the errors in opinion and the defects in practice, that have prevailed in the world; our want of ſound principles of morality, and of juſt ſentiments in theology; and thus to ſhew the uſe, the advantage, and the neceſſity of a divine revelation. But ſhe goes beyond her

her province when ſhe imagines, on one hand, that ſhe could have diſcovered by her own efforts the truths that have been revealed; or when ſhe raiſes objections to them, on the other; becauſe they happen not to coincide with her notions of what is beſt; or to contain *ſome things hard to be underſtood.*

It is the buſineſs of reaſon to examine the pretenſions of whatever profeſſes itſelf to be a divine revelation; to ſcrutinize the evidence; and to diſtinguiſh authenticity from forgery, truth from falſhood. But when once the diſtinction is made; when once the word of God is aſcertained; her duty is belief and acquieſcence. She goes beyond her province, when ſhe attempts to illuſtrate myſteries; or complains that they ſtand in need of illuſtration.

It is the buſineſs of reaſon to diſtinguiſh between objects of ſcience, and objects of faith; to determine where demonſtration ends, and teſtimony begins; to prove, what is capable of proof; but to receive with gratitude and ſubmiſſion, what ſhe could not

have diſcovered. She goes beyond her province, when ſhe attempts to demonſtrate, what does not admit demonſtration; or on that account refuſes aſſent, where competent teſtimony is produced.

It is the buſineſs of reaſon to illuſtrate the wiſdom and utility of the precepts of divine revelation. For what the authority of the Creator has commanded, his goodneſs has generally enabled us to diſcover an adequate cauſe: and it is the buſineſs of reaſon to ſhew, that his injunctions are ſuited to our nature and ſituation; to reconcile us to obedience, by diſplaying its ſubſerviency to our own intereſt and happineſs; and to perſuade us voluntarily to fulfil the duties, which authority might compel. But ſhe goes beyond her province, when ſhe attempts to inveſtigate all the counſels of the Almighty; or cavils at doctrines or duties; becauſe ſhe cannot trace thoroughly their meaning, or their foundation, their neceſſity, or their uſe.

It is the buſineſs of reaſon, laſtly, to explain and illuſtrate moral precepts; to apply general principles to every particular caſe;

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to decide between oppoſite intereſts and probabilities; and to regulate our whole conduct with a view to our final reſponſibility. But ſhe goes beyond her province, when ſhe ſuppoſes ſhe could, by any exertion of her own powers, have diſcovered the true principles of moral duty, or ſufficient ſanctions to enforce them; when ſhe reſts their authority and obligation on any other foundation than the will and word of God.

Reaſon then is not degraded by revelation; but aſſiſted and exalted. Her prerogative is not taken from her; but limited and aſcertained. Sublimer and better objects are preſented to her contemplation; and ſhe is employed upon them with greater ſatisfaction, and to more beneficial purpoſes. Faith has not ſuperſeded reaſon; but reaſon is made the judge of the baſis of faith. It is wholly contrary to ſound reaſon, not to acquieſce in ſcientific demonſtration; it is hardly leſs ſo, to refuſe aſſent to competent teſtimony. And if myſterious doctrines are neither impoſſible in themſelves, nor incompatible with a divine revelation; if they are traced by ſound criticiſm in the word of

God; and that is confirmed by evidence ſuited to the nature and importance of the object; then will it be neither rational nor innocent to refuſe our aſſent to them: they cannot be a ſufficient ground for ſeparating from the religious eſtabliſhment of our country; and ſtill leſs, for rejecting Chriſtianity itſelf. They will not, *in the day of the Lord*, excuſe our diſbelief of its truth, or our diſobedience to its laws.

SERMON

SERMON VI.

ON THE WANT OF UNIVERSALITY IN THE PROMULGATION AND RECEPTION OF THE CHRISTIAN REVELATION.

MARK xvi. 15.

And he ſaid unto them, go ye into all the world, and preach the goſpel to every creature.

OF the preceding diſquiſitions it has been the principal purpoſe to maintain, that a divine revelation was neceſſary for the inſtruction, the virtue, and the happineſs of mankind; and that it has accordingly been beſtowed upon them. Should the arguments, that have been advanced, be conſidered as concluſive; ſhould this revelation be allowed to have been as neceſſary, as it has been repreſented; an objection might then, with ſome plauſibility be urged againſt the divine origin

of our religion, from the want of univerſality in its promulgation and reception. If Chriſtianity be the revelation ſuppoſed, it has been often aſked, why are not all men equally in poſſeſſion, of what is to all of equal importance? Why, at leaſt, has it not been every where offered? Why have not the diſciples obeyed the injunction of their maſter; and *gone into all the world to preach the goſpel to every creature?* If there be a ſupreme Being of ſuch goodneſs, as to beſtow a revelation upon his creatures; and of ſuch juſtice, as to exclude all ſuſpicion of partiality; how ſhall we admit that revelation to be his; by which alone, according to its own declarations, mankind can obtain ſalvation; but of which a comparatively ſmall part of mankind only have heard; and which a proportion ſtill ſmaller have believed? Is it not more reaſonable to ſuppoſe, that a revelation really divine would have been as univerſally proclaimed, as it was univerſally neceſſary or beneficial? And that it would at the ſame time have been diſtinguiſhed by ſuch marks of truth and authenticity, as muſt have precluded any doubt upon the ſubject, and ſecured every where aſſent and obedience?

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Is not, in ſhort, the partial reception of Chriſtianity in the world, a reaſonable ground of objection to its credibility?

1. Before we proceed to a more direct anſwer to this objection, a few general obſervations may be made, which will at the ſame time diminiſh its force, and aſſiſt our reaſoning on the ſubject.

The diffidence and the reſtrictions, which ſhould govern all our diſquiſitions on the nature or the proceedings of the Deity, apply in their full force, and ought to have their full weight, on the ſubject before us; from its extent, its difficulty, and its importance.

It is undoubtedly juſt to ſuppoſe, that the Deity will always do what is wiſeſt and beſt: but it is not juſt to ſuppoſe, that he muſt always do what we may conceive to be wiſe and good; or that he will always enable us to judge of it, when it has been done. We are too apt haſtily to conclude that Chriſtianity ought to have been promulgated equally to all mankind; and to ſuggeſt various expedients, by which, we imagine, this might

have been effected. Yet it is by no means certain, either that the Deity was bound to give this univerſality to his revelation; or that any of thoſe expedients were practicable in themſelves, or ſufficient for ſo important a purpoſe.

To reaſon as if it had been incumbent upon the Almighty to have given the ſtrongeſt poſſible evidence to Chriſtianity; as if the proofs ought to have been ſo numerous and manifeſt, that neither negligence nor prejudice could withſtand them; this is to reaſon with little other grounds than what our own fancy has formed. Our inveſtigations ſhould be confined to the teſtimony that has been given; whether it be ſufficient to ſatisfy a candid enquirer; and whether we ſhall be juſtified in rejecting the evidence we have; only becauſe we have not more.

It is no leſs inconcluſive, than it is preſumptuous, to form in our own minds certain notions and principles reſpecting the nature and attributes of the Deity; and then to infer from them, againſt the evidence of facts, that he was bound in point of juſtice

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or neceſſity to effect every thing, to which our ſuppoſitions lead. That it was incumbent upon the Almighty to beſtow all his bleſſings, and therefore the light of the goſpel, equally upon all men, is a gratuitous aſſumption of our own, built upon this erroneous and dangerous baſis: and were it well-founded, would make the Deity no longer the ſpontaneous author of his own bleſſings; but a paſſive inſtrument, directed by an over-ruling fatality. Inſtead of concluding that the Creator is bound to adopt any given mode of proceeding in the diſpenſation of his bleſſings, becauſe it appears to us to be fit and right; it is much more rational to conclude that any given mode of proceeding is fit and right, becauſe it has been adopted.

Obſervations, like theſe, are continually repeated; becauſe they are continually neceſſary; to guard us againſt haſtily raiſing objections, on account of what we conceive to be difficulties; and to aſſiſt ſuch ſolutions of thoſe difficulties, as may not of themſelves fully ſatisfy the underſtanding. The preſent life appears to be a ſtate of trial of the faculties of our minds, as well as of the merits of our actions; of our candour and humility,

our truſt and reſignation to the word of our Creator; as well as of their practical fruits, juſtice and benevolence to our fellow-creatures. It is the time of probation for our faith, as well as for our works.

But though we cannot pretend at all times, nor perhaps at any time, fully to account for the proceedings of providence; yet in what materially concerns ourſelves, he has in his goodneſs generally enabled us to diſcover ſuch reaſons for his conduct, as may vindicate his own perfections, and ſatisfy reaſonable minds; as may, if not amounting to demonſtration and certainty, be at leaſt a ſufficient ground of faith and reſignation. For the want of univerſality in the Chriſtian revelation ſuch cauſes may be aſſigned, as will acquit its author of partiality, and remove all objection on that ground to its credibility.

2. In the nature and circumſtances of Chriſtianity itſelf may be found many reaſons for ſuppoſing the deſign to have been; not that its promulgation ſhould be local and partial; but that the knowledge and advantages of it ſhould be every where diffuſed;

fuſed; as they are every where of eſſential importance to human happineſs. When we conſider the preparation and ſolemnity, with which it was introduced; by the ſeparation of the Jews from the reſt of mankind; by the types and emblems in the law of Moſes; by the ſeries of prophets, and their miracles and predictions; and by the perſonal dignity of its immediate author: When we conſider again its own eſſential character; its doctrines announcing the moral government of God; its precepts, evidently calculated to teach univerſal morality; and the eternal ſanctions by which they are enforced; its poſitive inſtitutions, enjoined upon all its followers; its obvious utility in the intercourſe of life; the preternatural means employed for its propagation and eſtabliſhment; and the expreſs declarations of our Saviour and his apoſtles; we ſhall no longer doubt its being intended as an univerſal benefit and bleſſing; for the improvement and the ſalvation of all the ſons of men. With theſe circumſtances, indeed, the gainſayer fortifies his objection: but we conſider them as conſtituting a ſtrong probability, that his objection will one day be removed; that the

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light of revelation will in due ſeaſon viſit every country of the world. Why it has not yet effected its own beneficial purpoſes, will then be the only point in queſtion: and it will not be difficult to ſhew, that this circumſtance affords no reaſonable ground to deny its being, what it profeſſes itſelf to be, the gift of God to man.

3. That the Chriſtian revelation has not been given to all men; or not given equally and immediately to all; ought not to be conſidered as an objection to its authenticity; unleſs it can deſtroy the value or the reality of many other of the beſt gifts of heaven, to find that they alſo are beſtowed unequally and occaſionally. The light and heat of the ſun, and the rain and the dews of heaven, are confeſſedly the appointment and the gift of the great parent of the univerſe: and they are indiſpenſably neceſſary, not only to our comfort and enjoyments; but to the ſubſiſtence of every part of the creation. Yet they are irregularly and partially diſtributed. They are at one time too ſcanty for their own purpoſes; and at another, pernicious by their exceſs. While one region is oppreſſed by

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the ſcorching rays of a vertical ſun; another, by his diſtance or obliquity, ſuffers all the ſeverities of cold and darkneſs: and while the want or delay of the ſhower condemns one diſtrict to hopeleſs ſterility; another is overwhelmed by the ravages of an inundation.

Reaſon itſelf, the ſupreme endowment of the human mind, is diſtributed to its poſſeſſors in very different proportions: and while one man ſeems hardly raiſed by his intellectual faculties above the beaſts of the field; another appears to approach to the knowledge and illumination of angels. All the acquiſitions of reaſon are, as might be expected, like the reaſon from which they proceed, unequal, local, and occaſional. Our diſcoveries in art and ſcience, and our improvements in civil policy, have not only been made in diſtant parts and diſtant periods of the world; but are at this day poſſeſſed in very different degrees by different nations and different individuals. All the perſonal advantages of health and ſtrength; all the gifts of fortune; and all the enjoyments of life, are beſtowed in very various proportions: but this

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does not diminiſh; for it probably augments, their value and their uſe; and ought not to diminiſh our gratitude or ſatisfaction. Nor is the variety of our endowments and capacities a more juſt ground of complaint againſt Providence, than the variety of his creatures in the world; that brutes are not equal to men, and men to angels.

Nature and revelation have this remarkable ſimilitude: both bear ſtrong traces of their divine origin; yet in both are found what appear to us irregularites and defects. Though both are evidently wiſe and good; yet we can eaſily conceive it poſſible that both might have been good and wiſe in a higher degree. But this is ſuppoſition only; and the eſſential attibutes of the Deity ſhould lead us to conclude that it cannot be well-founded. What reaſons of wiſdom or benevolence might induce the Creator to permit this irregularity in the promulgation of his goſpel, is not now the queſtion. Its exiſtence cannot be doubted. But as long as the ſame irregularity is obſervable in many of the operations of nature; it can form no particular objection to the truth of revelation. If we

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were warranted in concluding, that Chriſtianity is not the gift of heaven; becauſe it is unequally imparted to mankind: the ſame irregularity muſt warrant the ſame concluſion with reſpect to human reaſon *: and on a principle not very diſſimilar, the calamities of life might be adduced to prove, that life itſelf cannot be the gift of God.

4. Of the objection to the Chriſtian revelation, from its want of univerſality, one principle feature has always been, that it was not communicated at a more early period of the world; that ſo many generations were ſuffered to paſs away without any opportunity of knowing it; and conſequently of profiting by its doctrines and its bleſſings.

The fact is certainly true; but the objection founded upon it ſeems to be by no means

* This argument is actually urged by Cotta in Cicero, De Nat. Deor. 3. 26 et ſeqq. Where he contends, that as reaſon by being abuſed has done ſo much miſchief, mankind had been better without it; and that as right reaſon has been granted only to a few, it cannot be the gift of the gods to any. A remarkable inſtance to what wretched reaſoning and falſe concluſions philoſophy may be reduced, when not aſſiſted by divine revelation.

unanſwerable; and therefore not concluſive againſt the truth of the religion we profeſs. If the Chriſtian revelation was intended for the inſtruction and benefit of mankind in general; it would naturally be given at the period moſt likely to anſwer its own purpoſes; when it was moſt probable the greateſt numbers would embrace it; when it had the faireſt chance to attain that univerſality, for which we contend it was deſigned.

They who complain that the Chriſtian revelation was not imparted at a period ſufficiently early, may repeat the complaint againſt every other period that can be named; till they have carried us back to the time when redemption firſt became neceſſary; to the hour when by the tranſgreſſion of our firſt parents *ſin entered the world, and death by ſin*. But had the Redeemer then appeared upon earth, it is obvious that the great purpoſes of his appearance could not have been obtained; at leaſt not in any mode ſimilar to that which has been purſued. In a world inhabited only by a ſingle family, how could he have taught, by his inſtruction or his example, the principles of good morals,

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or the relative duties of ſocial life? Who could have been, on one hand, his hearers and diſciples; and who, on the other, would have occaſioned his ſufferings; and condemned him to death? Who could have atteſted his miracles and his doctrines; or recorded them for the benefit of poſterity?

There can be no doubt but our firſt parents received from divine inſtruction a knowledge of human duty. Yet this knowledge was, even before the flood, ſo far corrupted or loſt, as to have ceaſed to anſwer the end for which it had been given. For it is expreſsly declared, that to puniſh this corruption or loſs was the cauſe and intention of the deluge. Divine inſtruction was again communicated to the family that eſcaped the general calamity. But was ſoon almoſt obliterated in the heathen world; and too often abuſed or corrupted even amongſt the Jews themſelves. If then our Saviour had appeared either before the judgment of the flood, or within a few centuries after it; what could have preſerved his doctrines and precepts from the fate of other divine communications? What could have ſecured the great purpoſe

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for which they were deſigned; their becoming the rule and law and ſalvation of all ſucceeding generations?

But ſuppoſing theſe difficulties ſurmounted; had Chriſtianity been promulgated at an earlier period of the world, it muſt ſtill have wanted, what conſtitutes an eſſential part of its evidence, the exiſtence, the ſeries, and the completion of the prophecies. Our Saviour could not have appealed, for the truth of his pretenſions, to the records of the people amongſt whom he ſhould have appeared, before ſuch records exiſted, or their credit was eſtabliſhed. He could not have claimed their belief in him, on the ground of their belief in their own prophets: nor could we at this day have compared his character and his actions with the predictions that deſcribe them: we could not have ſupported the credit of the New Teſtament, on its conformity to the ſcriptures of the Jews.

Had the Redeemer appeared at an earlier period of the world, another ſpecies of evidence muſt have wanted much of its natural weight. The power of working miracles has

has always been conſidered as the proper teſt of *a teacher come from God.* But till the ordinary courſe of nature had been long and attentively obſerved; till it was known to be fixed, regular and uniform; its occaſional interruption would have excited little ſurpriſe. The mighty works of the Saviour would hardly have been conſidered as miraculous. They would not have impreſſed themſelves on the minds of men, as adequate evidence of divine authority; as unqueſtionable vouchers for ſupernatural truth.

Suppoſing again theſe additional difficulties removed; ſuppoſing the exiſtence and completion of the prophecies; ſuppoſing his inſtructions delivered, his miracles admitted, and every other function of the Redeemer fulfilled; how were theſe things to be recorded and preſerved for the information and advantage of poſterity? Till an alphabet was invented, and introduced into general practice, the hiſtory and evidence of revelation; our rule of faith and conduct; the terms of our acceptance and ſalvation, could have been tranſmitted to us only by tradition. The goſpel could have received

little ſupport from any fixed and permanent records; no confirmation from the notice of cotemporary authors; from the hoſtilities of its enemies; or the vindications of its friends. We have no indiſputable evidence that the art of alphabetical writing was known, and certainly none that it was in general uſe, till ſome ages after the deluge: and how the goſpel could by tradition only for more than twenty centuries have been preſerved at all; or if preſerved, upon what principles it could have required and obtained attention and credit; it is fortunately not incumbent upon us to determine. This difficulty preſſes upon thoſe only, who think the Redeemer ought to have appeared, as ſoon as redemption became neceſſary; that the Chriſtian revelation ſhould have been more nearly coeval with mankind.

Admitting, however, that even in this there was no difficulty; admitting, what has indeed been maintained, that the ſigns of articulate ſounds, as well as the power of uttering the ſounds themſelves; that an alphabet, as well as a language, was given by revelation from heaven; and admitting that

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it was given even to the earlieſt inhabitants of the earth; ſtill at leaſt one reaſon of conſiderable weight may be aſſigned for the delay in the promulgation of the goſpel. It was of importance to the ſucceſs of Chriſtianity to poſtpone the publication of it, till its neceſſity ſhould be apparent and confeſſed; till the general prevalence of idolatry, and a conſequent corruption of morals equally general, ſhould have made men ſenſible of their own inability to attain the knowledge of true religion; or to ſecure the performance of the moral and ſocial duties; and therefore the more willing to receive, what promiſed to be of ſuch eſſential ſervice to both. It is true that the prepoſſeſſions and prejudices, the paſſions, opinions, and habits of the Gentiles, as well as of the Jews, at the time of our Saviour's appearance, prevented too many from paying attention to theſe conſiderations; to evidence of this nature in favour of the goſpel. But to the candid and judicious of all ſucceeding generations, it has formed an argument of important uſe and efficacy. It has enabled us to compare the advantages of Chriſtianity, with the evils it is calculated

to remove; to conſider that as credible, which is ſo highly beneficial; to ſee that the Creator would probably give, what was ſo neceſſary to the happineſs of his creatures.

Theſe difficulties exiſted in their greateſt force in the earlieſt periods of the world. Every century, as it paſſed, took away ſomething from their weight: but they ſeem to have been completely removed only at the era, when the Redeemer actually appeared upon earth. That era was indeed diſtinguiſhed by many important circumſtances of its own, peculiarly favourable to the extenſive propagation of the goſpel.

The expectation of ſome mighty deliverer about this period had been very generally excited; not only amongſt the people, *to whom were committed the oracles of God*; but throughout almoſt all the countries of the Eaſt. The prophecies had frequently and progreſſively announced ſuch an event; and ſome of them in a good meaſure fixed the time of their own completion. The Jews had been repeatedly and widely diſperſed amongſt foreign nations. Their character

and manners, as well as their ſcriptures, had become extenſively known: and theſe ſcriptures themſelves had been tranſlated into the language then ſtudied by all, who aſpired to the reputation of learning. Had revelation broken in abruptly upon mankind, without any ſuch introduction and preparation, it might have excited more wonder than belief; it might have rather awed men into ſubmiſſion, than produced rational conviction. And had it been longer delayed, records and prophecies might have become obſcure and queſtionable; and hope and expectation either been deluded by impoſture; or languiſhed of themſelves, and ſunk into heedleſs incredulity.

At this era too the Jews were in a ſituation the moſt favourable to the promulgation of Chriſtianity. They were conquered, but not diſperſed; ſubject to a foreign power; but ſtill united as a nation; and with a few reſtrictions, in poſſeſſion of their own polity and laws. By theſe means their records were preſerved, and their worſhip tolerated; their civil power was regulated; and their whole conduct obſerved and known. Had they

been deſtroyed or diſperſed; their hiſtory, their prophecies, and their typical ceremonies might have been deſtroyed or diſperſed with them; and much of the beſt evidence of our religion weakened or loſt: and had they been ſtill unſubdued and independent, theſe circumſtances would have been leſs ſpeedily, leſs minutely, and leſs extenſively known. They might have put the Saviour to death more early or more ſecretly; and their proceedings would not have been officially communicated by a Roman governor to his imperial maſter.

At this era again mankind enjoyed almoſt an univerſal peace. In the earlieſt ages of the world, its inhabitants were divided into petty communities, differing from each other in language, manners, intereſts, and ſuperſtitions; and were conſequently in a ſtate very unfavourable to the wide extenſion of information; to the propagation of a religion intended for their general reception and benefit. When larger monarchies were eſtabliſhed, they were engaged in almoſt unceaſing hoſtilities: for the great objects of their ambition and purſuit were military

glory,

glory, and the extenſion of their dominions. But at the period under conſideration, the Romans had become maſters of the greateſt part of the known world. All reſiſtance had ceaſed; and mankind enjoyed the bleſſings of peace in return for their ſubjection. This left the minds of men at leiſure to receive inſtruction; and the general intercourſe between different countries facilitated its communication. Their previous progreſs in other arts and ſciences had enabled them to comprehend what was taught on the ſubject of religion; to examine its evidence, and judge of its pretenſions. Though the learning of the Romans was ſometimes employed to oppoſe Chriſtianity in argument, and their power to perſecute its preachers; yet was it by this means brought forward to notice and attention; and, as in every other conteſt, the truth continued to gain ground; the wiſdom of providence drew good out of evil; the propagation of his religion, from what was intended for its ſuppreſſion.

Surely then the period of the appearance of the Redeemer, was better calculated than any

that went before it, to give ſucceſs to his miſſion. What our ſcriptures call *the fulneſs of time*, was indeed the time moſt likely to give that univerſality to revelation, for which, we maintain, it was intended. As far therefore as the time alone is concerned, inſtead of forming an objection to the divine origin of the goſpel; it is rather an argument in favour of its authenticity; it ſhould prove, not the failure of its purpoſe, but the wiſdom of its author*. Why this period, with all its advantages, has not hitherto been the means of diffuſing revelation univerſally, remains yet to be enquired.

5. It is in the firſt place to be obſerved, that Chriſtianity is not yet univerſally diffuſed; becauſe it appears to be only in its progreſs

* That Chriſt did not appear more early upon earth is not, it might be obſerved, independently of other circumſtances, an objection to the reality or the deſign of his appearance; any more than it is an objection to the reality or the advantages of the voyage of Columbus; that it was not made by Hanno or Eudoxus. The truth of Chriſtianity is not more affected by the time of its promulgation to the world; than the diſcoveries of Newton are invalidated, becauſe they were not made by Archimedes or Pythagoras.

towards

towards what, we ſuppoſe, will be its ultimate eſtabliſhment. That the communication of religious knowledge to the Jews was gradual and progreſſive; and that each portion opened the way for the introduction of the next; till they were at length fully prepared for the reception of our Saviour and his goſpel, has been repeatedly ſhewn by the advocates of revelation; and, as far as the mode of proceeding only is concerned, not denied by its adverſaries: and that the progreſs of Chriſtianity ſince has been in like manner gradual and occaſional, its own hiſtory will abundantly teſtify. The goſpel was at firſt publiſhed to the world by its author alone. It was then propagated by a ſmall and ſelect number of his diſciples and apoſtles: and a conſiderable time elapſed before it ſpread beyond the limits of a ſingle nation; of no great extent, power, or celebrity. Amongſt the Gentiles afterwards its progreſs was ſtill ſlow and gradual; beginning with ſingle churches, collected by ſingle apoſtles; till time and circumſtances gave it importance and extenſion. During its infancy indeed it was ſupported by preternatural aſſiſtance; by the power of working miracles, and the

advantages

advantages of inſpiration granted to its preachers; and by whatever elſe was neceſſary, of the peculiar care and protection of providence. But when its followers had in various nations become numerous, and were formed into regular ſocieties; when its hiſtory, its doctrines, and its precepts had been fixed in permanent records, to which on all occaſions the neceſſary appeals could be made; it was then that the viſible interpoſition of heaven was withdrawn; and the religion left to make its way by human and ordinary means; by the force of its evidence, and the value of its doctrines; by the utility of its precepts, and the talents and diligence of its teachers; aſſiſted only by ſuch protection from providence, as we believe him always to beſtow on his own bleſſings, for the benefit of his creatures.

The progreſs of revelation therefore muſt now be expected to reſemble that of every other acquiſition, which heaven allows mankind to make: and the deſign of the Almighty ſeems to be, that every improvement ſhould be gradual and progreſſive; the joint effect of his providence and our own exertions.

tions. Mankind have obtained their knowledge, not by ſyſtems, but by portions; not by intuition and illumination, but by continued application and ſtudy. Every art and ſcience has been extended by degrees; as men became capable of making new diſcoveries themſelves; or of receiving and reliſhing them, when made by more ſucceſsful ſtudents. It is true that circumſtances peculiarly unfavourable have ſometimes retarded improvement on one hand; or men of extraordinary talents advanced it ſuddenly and rapidly, on the other; that one nation has ſtood ſtill or loſt ground, while another has made its moſt important acquiſitions; yet ſtill the progreſs in general has continued: almoſt every age has availed itſelf of the diſcoveries already made; and added ſomething to the knowledge of thoſe that went before it. It is indeed only by one acquiſition that men become capable of another. Had many of our modern improvements in art and ſcience; had our diſcoveries in chymiſtry, navigation, or aſtronomy been offered to the early inhabitants of the earth; they could not have been benefited; for they could not have underſtood what was offered.

They

They would probably have either derided them as the artifices of impoſture; or dreaded them as the productions of the powers of magic; but they certainly could not have applied them to the purpoſes of life.

That it was indeed the deſign of providence, that Chriſtianity ſhould be gradually diffuſed amongſt mankind, not only appears from its hiſtory; but ſeems to be pointed out in the illuſtrations employed by our Saviour himſelf. He compares his goſpel to *a ſeed, that while he, who caſt it into the ground, ſhould ſleep and riſe night and day, would ſpring and grow up, he knoweth not how*; till the fruit was brought forth. He tells us that the kingdom of heaven is like to *a grain of muſtard ſeed; which, though the ſmalleſt of all ſeeds, is when grown the greateſt among herbs; and the birds of the air come and lodge in its branches*: that it is *a little leaven hid in three meaſures of meal, till the whole be leavened.*

It is from conſiderations like theſe, we conclude, that providence beſtows all his bleſſings at ſuch times and in ſuch proportions,

as

as are beſt ſuited to our previous attainments, and preſent circumſtances; when we are beſt prepared to profit by his mercies. We ſhould always conſider, not only what it may be fit for him to beſtow; but for us to receive; not merely what it is poſſible for an all-perfect Being to do; but what can be done with advantage for beings every way imperfect like ourſelves. It is thus, then, that revelation, like every other bleſſing, has been given. And that Chriſtianity is not yet every where known, or has not every where produced its full effects, cannot alone be a ſufficient reaſon for rejecting it: unleſs we ſhould be juſtified in rejecting our preſent acquiſitions in art and ſcience, becauſe they are not yet brought to perfection; or not yet univerſally taught and adopted.

6. In oppoſition to this reaſoning it may be urged that from the peculiar nature of revelation; from its ſuperior value and ſuperior neceſſity; it might have been expected to have been diſtinguiſhed in its progreſs from ſciences merely human; and to have been communicated univerſally and effectually. That the progreſs of Chriſtianity ought to have

have been diſtinguiſhed from the progreſs of ſcience in general, may very ſafely be admitted: for it has been abundantly ſo diſtinguiſhed. Not to dwell on the detail of more minute circumſtances; the completion of prophecies, and the working of miracles, during its introduction and its infancy, were ſurely diſtinctions every way worthy of *the wiſdom from above*. But with reſpect to its being univerſally and effectually communicated, one important queſtion will be, in what manner this could be effected.

The method, which our ſcriptures inform us was purſued, for communicating revelation to mankind, was ſuch as might naturally have been expected: to impart it firſt to agents ſelected for the purpoſe; and to authoriſe them to inſtruct the world at large; furniſhing them at the ſame time with credentials ſufficient, not only to convince the judgment of the candid enquirer; but to engage his affections in its favour.

To this plan of proceeding, however, on account of its ſuppoſed inefficacy, the objection has been made; and two others, and, I think,

think, two only, entitled to notice, have been ſuggeſted. The firſt to impreſs the truths of Chriſtianity by divine inſpiration ſo forcibly upon the mind of each individual; that they ſhall become the conſtant and unerring guide of his ſentiments and conduct: the other, to publiſh its doctrines, and produce its evidence, as often as may be required; whenever ſcepticiſm or infidelity ſhall oppoſe it. It does not ſeem difficult to ſhew, however, that both theſe methods are leſs eligible than that which they would ſupplant; that they are liable to greater inconveniences, than thoſe which they profeſs to prevent or remove.

If the former of theſe methods were purſued; the inſpiration or impulſe upon the mind of each individual, would either be irreſiſtible, or it would not. If it were irreſiſtible, it would immediately take away all our freedom of will and action; and conſequently deſtroy all the diſtinctions between obedience and tranſgreſſion, and all the equity of puniſhment or reward. It muſt indeed reduce the man to a ſtate of mechaniſm; and confound the whole ſyſtem of the religion, which it is intended to propagate.

If

If it were not irreſiſtible; it might fail to be efficacious. If we retained under it the full exerciſe of our faculties; if we remained at liberty to obey or to neglect it; this would leave us in our faith and obedience, juſt where we are at preſent. With reſpect to the obligation upon the mind of the individual, it would be no way preferable to the plan that has been adopted; and with reſpect to the public, it would be expoſed to much greater inconveniencies. As there would be no fixed ſtandard of truth; no univerſal rule of conduct; no acknowledged authority, to which appeals could be made; there would be no criterion, by which the errors of ignorance could be corrected; or the extravagancies of enthuſiaſm reſtrained; by which the pretenſions of the hypocrite could be tried; or peace and uniformity preſerved in faith or worſhip, principle or practice.

Were the ſecond method purſued, it would probably ſoon diſappoint its own purpoſes. Were miracles, the proper evidence of a divine revelation, to be repeated, as often as doubt or infidelity might require, they would ſoon ceaſe to excite wonder or attention; they

they would ſoon ceaſe to be conſidered as preternatural; and therefore as a ſufficient teſtimony of preternatural truth. When our Saviour with a few loaves fed a numerous multitude, they believed without heſitation that the food had been miraculouſly multiplied; for they immediately exclaimed; *this is of a truth, that prophet that ſhould come into the world.* But we, who are conſtantly fed by a multiplication of the fruits of the earth equally wonderful, behold it without ſurpriſe or emotion; with little reflection upon the power or goodneſs of him who gives it. Yet the principal difference ſeems to be, that the former miracle was ſingle and occaſional; and that the latter is annual and familiar. The former was a ſenſible deviation from the eſtabliſhed order of things; the latter was ordained at the creation of the world; and is continued by the fixed laws of nature. The compariſon, however, is ſufficient to ſhew what would be the probable conſequence of our greater familiarity with miracles. Their effect would ſoon be wholly loſt; and inſtead of ſpreading revelation more widely, or eſtabliſhing it more firmly; every repetition of them would weaken its beſt teſtimony;

and leave it at laſt without any deciſive evidence whatever.

Theſe methods, then, and probably all others that could be deviſed, appear leſs eligible than that which has been purſued: and it ſhould not in candour be urged as an objection to the truth of our religion, that the plan adopted for its propagation, has not yet produced any other effects, than thoſe which might naturally have been expected.

7. Suppoſing, however, that by either of theſe methods, or by any other that can be ſuggeſted, the truth of revelation were irreſiſtibly impreſſed upon the human mind; it might be attended with ſuch effects, as would in a great meaſure diſappoint its own purpoſes. Were our belief of a future ſtate, by intuition, by inſpiration, by continual miracles, or by any other means whatever, improved into indiſputable certainty; the impreſſion might be too ſtrong for due attention to the duties of the preſent life. It muſt greatly reſtrain, if it did not deſtroy, our freedom of thought and choice. It would in no ſmall degree confound the diſtinctions of charac-

character; by awing all diſpoſitions into ſilence and ſubmiſſion. Above all, it might ſo wholly engroſs our minds, as to ſuperſede worldly attachments, and all the uſual incitements to induſtry; as to withdraw our attention from the progreſs of human affairs, and the claims of civil ſociety. Men might be too much engaged with the proſpects of futurity; and too little with the cares and offices of life: meditation and devotion might fill their thoughts and their hours; and the plough and the loom be ſuffered to ſtand ſtill. It is not poſſible to pronounce with certainty on the conſequences of any ſtate of things, of which we have had no experience. But that ſomething like what has been ſtated would be the effect of the ſyſtem ſuppoſed, is neither improbable in itſelf, nor wholly without evidence to ſupport it. St. Paul had frequent occaſion to call back his converts to the ordinary duties of their reſpective ſtations: and we are told that *all who believed were together, and had all things in common; and ſold their poſſeſſions and goods; and parted them to all men, as every man had need. And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from houſe to houſe, did eat*

their meat with gladneſs and ſingleneſs of heart. This ſeems nothing more than what might naturally be expected, while the miracles of the apoſtles were immediately before their eyes: nor was it impracticable or ruinous in a ſmall ſociety, ſurrounded, and conſequently protected, by a larger community. But were ſuch ſentiments and conduct to become permanent and general; the human character and human ſociety muſt aſſume a new form; and it is by no means clear that the neceſſary arts of life would be cultivated and ſupported. It is the hope of terreſtrial advantages; the love of riches or diſtinction; the proſpect of future eaſe and indulgence; it is, in one word, the incitement of our paſſions, that prompts us to action and exertion; that ſometimes indeed impels men to vice; but which at the ſame time gives exerciſe to all our virtues; which provides for our ſubſiſtence and enjoyment; and in a great meaſure conſtitutes that probation of diſpoſition and conduct, which revelation aſſures us was intended by our Creator. As Chriſtianity is now offered to our acceptance, room is left for theſe incitements and their effects: ſufficient motives to temporal intereſt are compatible with due attention

tention to the injunctions of religion. And it ought not to be made an objection to the truth of revelation; that it does not compel, where it profeſſes only to perſuade; that ſome have not embraced, what all are at liberty to refuſe.

8. With this gradual and progreſſive advancement of revelation others again are ſtill diſſatisfied; becauſe it is not more regular and rapid; becauſe it ſeems, that not only a length of time beyond all calculation will be required to give it that univerſality, for which we maintain it is intended; but that the diſſolution of the world itſelf is an event much more probable, than the univerſal eſtabliſhment of the goſpel.*

That

* It has been obſerved, that as the world at large, like every individual, has had its infancy and its growth; it will, like them, have alſo its old age and decline; and that it is much more probable ſuch decline is approaching; than that yet greater improvements in ſcience and virtue are to be expected.

In ſupport of this notion it has been further obſerved, that periods of time ſomewhat ſimilar elapſed between the creation and the deluge; between the deluge and the birth of Chriſt; and between the birth of Chriſt and the preſent day. And it is ſuppoſed from thence, that we are now pro-

That the world is to be conſidered as verging towards its decline, is ſo far from being admitted, that the contrary, it is thought, may be much more plauſibly maintained. Many objects in nature, and almoſt every circumſtance in human life, may lead us to

bably again on the eve of ſome mighty change in the order of things; perhaps the diſſolution of the world.

With reſpect to this calculation on the ſimilar periods of time, it appears altogether fanciful and viſionary; and it is attempted to be ſhewn above, that ſo far from the world's being probably on the decline, the probability is much ſtronger on the other ſide.

With reſpect to the compariſon between mankind in general and an individual; it by no means follows that becauſe a reſemblance has been diſcovered in ſome particulars, it muſt therefore hold good in all. A fanciful illuſtration is not a concluſive argument. The human frame in an individual cannot be preſerved in its vigour beyond a certain period; it can by no art be ſecured againſt decay and diſſolution. But the human race is in a great degree renewed by every new generation; and for any thing we can diſcover to the contrary, is capable of being renewed without end. That the human race indeed have, figuratively at leaſt, had their infancy and their growth, like an individual, is certainly true; and it is poſſible they may have their maturity and decay. But before it can be rendered probable that ſuch decay is approaching, it muſt be proved that they have already reached their maturity: and that is the very point in queſtion.

ſuppoſe, that we are yet in the earlier ſtages of progreſſive advancement. Many fertile regions of the globe are yet imperfectly cultivated; and many are wholly devoid of cultivation or inhabitants. Yet if we believe the Creator to have made nothing in vain, and reflect upon the paſt or preſent tranſactions of mankind, we ſhall ſee abundant reaſon to expect that theſe vacancies in nature will one day be filled, and theſe ſolitudes ſwarm with population. It is not leſs rational, than it is pleaſing, to ſuppoſe, that the den of the beaſt of prey will at ſome future period give place to the dwelling of the huſbandman; and the marſh and the foreſt hereafter exhibit only fields covered with the harveſt, and plantations ſmiling with the olive and the grape.

But the cleareſt and beſt evidence is to be drawn from the ſtate and progreſs of art and ſcience. This conſideration has often been adduced to prove that the world had a Creator and a beginning: and it may be again adduced to ſhew how improbable it is, that it ſhould ſoon have an end. Many of our moſt important advances in various departments of ſcience are but of a modern date. Not to

dwell upon our greater dexterity in all manual operations; and the conſequent improvement of whatever depends upon them: not to ſpecify what is minute or queſtionable; ſome of the moſt valuable diſcoveries in medicine have been but lately introduced amongſt us: the compaſs of the mariner, by which the intercourſe of mankind is ſo eſſentially aſſiſted, has been known but a few centuries: and at a ſtill later period the art was invented, by which all other arts are beſt ſupported. Whatever is known in one country, we have now the means of tranſmitting to others with accuracy as well as facility. Whatever advances in ſcience each generation ſhall be able to make; the art of printing will preſerve for the benefit of the moſt diſtant poſterity.

That ſuch arts as theſe have hitherto been in progreſs, not only renders it probable that they will continue to make ſtill further and more rapid advances; but it leads us to conclude, that the Deity would not grant ſuch improvements to be abortive and uſeleſs. Is it credible, under the diſpenſations of a wiſe and good providence, that the moſt valuable arts ſhould become known to the world, only when the

the world was on the verge of diſſolution? That a few individuals of a few nations ſhould be mocked with diſcoveries, the good effects of which neither themſelves nor their poſterity ſhould ſurvive to enjoy? Is it not much more rational to ſuppoſe, that theſe improvements will one day be carried to a much greater height; and extended to all the nations of the earth? that the bleſſings of civilization will not only reach the naked and houſeleſs ſavage; but cheer the future inhabitants of countries yet unknown? that the ſun of ſcience will one day illuminate the remoteſt regions of the habitable world*?

In

* It muſt be acknowledged indeed, that as arts and ſciences are calculated principally for the purpoſes of the preſent life, and for the uſe of creatures deſtined to a future and better ſtate of exiſtence; their progreſs and perfection here cannot be ſhewn to be indiſpenſably neceſſary, either for the enjoyments of mankind, or the vindication of the attributes of the Deity. This conſideration, therefore, will not alone enſure to us the protracted duration of the preſent ſyſtem of nature and the world. But as they appear to be in theſe times, not only in a ſtate of improvement, but improving more rapidly than at any former period; as theſe gradual advances are agreeable to our beſt notions of the general proceedings of providence; and as they ſeem likely, not only to furniſh greater enjoyment to a greater number

In conjunction with general ſcience, will probably be diffuſed the knowledge and bleſſings of the goſpel. Its progreſs, no doubt, as it has hitherto been, will be often interrupted. From the influence of local and temporary circumſtances, it will appear ſometimes to ſtand ſtill; and ſometimes perhaps to loſe ground. But ſtill, we truſt, it will on the whole continue to advance; and that it will finally triumph over all oppoſition, its own predictions teach us to expect. It is true that, as far as we are able to judge, many centuries muſt elapſe before theſe happy events can take place. A length of time will be required for their completion; of which we can form no probable conjecture or calculation. But let us not be deceived by the narrowneſs of our comprehenſion or

number of individuals in the preſent life, but to enable men to deſerve and to receive ſuperior degrees of happineſs and glory in the life to come; it is more reaſonable to ſuppoſe they will yet long be permitted to proceed, than that they ſhould be ſoon or ſuddenly ſtopped. The proſpect and the practicability of their further advancment is ſurely preſumptive evidence of the opinion it is adduced to ſupport; that the world is in its progreſs, not in its decline; that its future duration will probably be much greater than the paſt.

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our nature. To us, weak and ſhort-lived as we are, a few years appear laſting and important. All our intereſt, our influence, and our purſuits, are confined within a very limited extent both of time and ſpace. But with the Almighty proximity and diſtance, preſent and future almoſt loſe their diſtinctions. With him, *one day is as a thouſand years, and a thouſand years as one day.* Of the plan of Providence a ſmall part only appears to be yet accompliſhed. The time the world has yet exiſted is probably but a moment, in compariſon of the time it muſt yet continue. The numbers of men, therefore, that have been born and died without the knowledge of the goſpel, will be in no proportion, that we can calculate, to the numbers that ſhall hereafter enjoy its light. In the lapſe of ages the day will probably come, when the Redeemer ſhall be thought to have appeared, not in the decline, but in the infancy of the world; when the objection ſhall be, if objection ſtill continue to be made, not that he appeared at too late, but at too early a period; not that too many generations were ſuffered to paſs away before the promulgation of Chriſtianity; but that

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too many have ſince elapſed; till the evidence cannot be ſo traced as to give conviction and ſatisfaction. The truth is, that if it was neceſſary the Redeemer ſhould appear upon earth; he muſt appear at ſome given time. The time, at which he did appear, has been already ſhewn to have been in the higheſt degree ſuitable and ſeaſonable; and till a period more ſeaſonable can be pointed out, our objections on that ground will have as little weight, as they have candour or piety.

9. But admitting this hypotheſis to be juſt in its fulleſt extent; another difficulty will ſtill remain: if the bleſſings of the Chriſtian revelation are one day to become univerſal; as indeed the attributes of the Deity warrant our believing; it may ſtill be enquired; how thoſe men are to be benefited by it, who lived and died before its publication to the world; or who at this day are born and die, without any opportunity of knowing it.

The nations not bleſſed with the light of the goſpel, we ſuppoſe, will be judged hereafter according to what they know, or might have

have known; according to the uſe they have made of the faculties with which they are endowed; and of their acquaintance with religion; in whatever degree, and from whatever ſource, they may have obtained it. And to them may be extended the benefits of redemption; though the knowledge of it has not reached them. Our Saviour is repreſented in ſcripture as the price, the ſacrifice, the ſatisfaction, the propitiation, and the atonement, for the ſins of men. But in what ſenſe preciſely theſe expreſſions are to be underſtood; in what this atonement particularly conſiſts; the ſcriptures have no where explicitly declared; nor is it neceſſary to the preſent purpoſe to determine. If reconciliation to the divine favour be procured for us by the incarnation and death of Chriſt, whatever be the mode or principle by which it is obtained; the benefit, it is obvious, may be extended to mankind in general; not only to thoſe who know and profeſs the doctrines of the goſpel; but to thoſe alſo, *who cannot believe in him of whom they have not heard, and who could not hear without a preacher.* Upon what terms, or in what proportion, the

the bleſſings of redemption may be granted to thoſe, who neither claim them by typical ſacrifices, like the Jew, nor by faith and prayer, like the Chriſtian, it is impoſſible for us to decide; and therefore uſeleſs to enquire. But unto whomſoever much is given; of him, we know, much will be required; and of courſe leſs will be required of him, to whom leſs has been given. The benefit of the atonement may reaſonably be expected to be as extenſive, as the effect of tranſgreſſion: and *as in Adam all die; even ſo in Chriſt ſhall all be made alive.*

In this account of the benefit and efficacy of redemption it has always appeared to me that the mind might reaſonably acquieſce; and it is certainly entitled to very ſerious attention. If it be juſt; it not only anſwers deciſively the objection to Chriſtianity from its want of univerſality; but removes ſome other important difficulties on the ſubject. It acquits Providence of that partiality, which has been charged upon the Chriſtian diſpenſation. It refutes all objection with reſpect to the time of the Saviour's appearance

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in the world: becauſe if expiation be made by the ſacrifice of his death; its efficacy cannot be affected by the time at which it is offered: and it reconciles us to the doctrine of atonement, by the value of the ſacrifice; by the ſufficiency of the ſatisfaction. It forms an argument of no inconſiderable weight againſt the hereſy of the Socinians; as it implies the dignity and the divinity in the perſon of the Redeemer. It may illuſtrate ſeveral important points, which are continually aſſerted or implied in the language of ſcripture: that the nature of ſin is not reconcileable to the nature of God: that the tranſgreſſion of the divine law required ſome expiation, before it could be forgiven: that juſtice muſt have ſome ſatisfaction, before mercy could take place; or that our offences could not be pardoned, till they were rendered pardonable by the ſacrifice of Chriſt: that Jeſus Chriſt is the propitiation for the ſins of the whole world; and that there is none other name under heaven given to men, whereby they may be ſaved. To this account too perhaps leſs can be objected than to any other: and an interpretation of a point

point ſo intereſting and important, which removes ſo many difficulties, and is itſelf liable to ſo few, has a peculiar claim to our attention and conſideration. It offers as well peace to our ſcruples, as conviction to our underſtanding.

If then there be any foundation for the opinions that have been advanced; if there be any weight in the conſiderations that have been offered; no ſolid objection to the truth of Chriſtianity can be founded on the preſent and apparent want of univerſality in its promulgation and reception. If the frailty and the fall of human nature were foreſeen; and the ſcheme of redemption at the ſame time adopted as the remedy: if the will and laws of God were revealed at ſucceſſive periods of time, as men were in a condition to profit by the revelation; if the communications to Adam and to the patriarchs, to Moſes and to the prophets, were not temporary and occaſional expedients; but parts of one general plan; originally choſen and regularly purſued: if the appearance of Jeſus Chriſt upon earth was the end and com-

completion, of what the former communications had been only the preparation and the beginning: if the light and knowledge of this revelation have been hitherto in their progreſs, and will in due ſeaſon extend as far as human nature is extended: if finally, according to the language of the apoſtle, *the lamb was ſlain from the beginning of the world; and having appeared once, hath put away ſin by the ſacrifice of himſelf*; then ſurely is the diſpenſation of the goſpel every way worthy of its author: the work of the redemption of man muſt appear even in our eyes ſuitable to the wiſdom and goodneſs of him that made him; as magnificent in its deſign, as beneficial in its effects. Inſtead of raiſing objections to the authenticity of the Chriſtian revelation; becauſe it has not been communicated to others; we ſhould learn to be grateful to the mercy which has beſtowed it upon ourſelves. It has perhaps been left unfiniſhed, to give us the merit of doing, what appears to be our duty; of contributing to its extenſion and univerſality by our inſtruction and our example. Where we cannot have the gratification of underſtanding

the myſteries of providence; let us at leaſt have the virtue of reſignation: and not waſte in too curious enquiry into points we cannot aſcertain, thoſe hours, which ought to be employed in ſtudying to obtain the promiſes of God by obedience to his laws.

SERMON

SERMON VII.

ON PRAYER.

JOB xxi. 15.

What is the Almighty, that we ſhould ſerve him? And what profit ſhall we have, if we pray unto him?

TO all who believe in the exiſtence and providence of a Supreme Being, the trueſt and firmeſt foundation of moral and religious duty is the will of God: and when his will is once known, we confeſs our part to be ſubmiſſion and obedience. Whether the commands of our almighty governor had appeared eaſy or ſevere; whether we could, or could not, have diſcovered in them any wiſdom, fitneſs, or utility; ſtill we ſhould have been bound to perform what he had enjoined. His authority alone, when once admitted, is

indiſputable obligation. In preſcribing laws for our conduct, however, he has ſeldom exerted this authority, without having at the ſame time enabled us to diſcover ſatisfactory reaſons for the exertion. The precepts, which he has delivered, we can generally perceive to be well ſuited to our nature and ſituation; to be wiſely calculated, in moſt caſes, to promote the immediate advantage of the individual and of ſociety; and in every inſtance, to ſecure thoſe future and more important bleſſings; which he has graciouſly promiſed, as the reward of virtue and piety in our preſent ſtate. It is thus that his goodneſs ſoftens the terrors of his power; and that we can ſubmit with chearfulneſs to the will of our Creator; when we know that ſubmiſſion is required only for our own good.

But though we are permitted to ſee in the commands of God, wiſdom, benevolence, and utility every way worthy of himſelf; yet were it the higheſt preſumption to ſuppoſe we could diſcover all the motives and principles, by which the Deity himſelf might be influenced when he gave them. And though

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we can perceive theſe excellencies in his commands in general; we are by no means allowed to perceive them equally in all. Some of the duties preſcribed to us are ſo clearly juſt in their general principle; and the benefits reſulting from the due diſcharge of them ſo great and obvious; that it has been ſuppoſed our obligation to perform them may admit ſcientific demonſtration; and that they are duties independently of the will of God, and antecedently to his commands. But of others, the general principle has appeared ſo obſcure, or the utility ſo queſtionable; that it has been doubted whether it was at all incumbent upon us to perform them; whether the ſuppoſed obligation was not wholly either the contrivance of policy, or the error of ſuperſtition. Under the former deſcription has been included the greater part of the moral virtues: under the latter, many of the offices of devotion; and eſpecially, the act of prayer. The propriety of the uſe of prayer has been ſometimes doubted even by wiſe and good men; becauſe doubts have been entertained by them reſpecting its efficacy and ſucceſs: and by ſome of the adverſaries of religion, this

propriety has been wholly denied: becauſe, as they maintain, no rational cauſe can be aſſigned, why prayer ſhould procure for us any advantages, which without it we might not equally hope to obtain.

With a view to remove ſuch doubts, and to invalidate ſuch an objection, it is propoſed; firſt to ſtate conciſely the general advantages of prayer; and then to enquire what grounds we have to hope for its efficacy and ſucceſs. To which I ſhall beg leave to add a few obſervations on the propriety of public or ſocial prayer; and on prayer in precompoſed and preſcribed forms.

1. If we underſtand the term prayer in its more comprehenſive ſenſe, as equivalent to religious worſhip; as including our praiſes and thankſgivings, as well as our petitions, to the Deity; it will be found to poſſeſs ſome obvious and important recommendations.

Religious worſhip, or the homage of prayer and praiſe, ſeems naturally and reaſonably due from the creature to his Creator. That we are unequal to the ſupply of our own

own wants; that we neither know what would conſtitute our happineſs, nor how to purſue it when known; that we are ignorant, weak, and dependent; has always been acknowledged by philoſophers, as well as by divines: it is a truth, no leſs the reſult of our own experience, than the dictate of divine revelation. When we reflect for how many bleſſings we are already indebted to the Almighty, and how many more we ſtill expect to receive at his hands; and which without his protection and permiſſion we can never hope to obtain; to be impreſſed with ſentiments of gratitude and veneration towards him, is equally conſonant to the feelings of the heart and the deductions of the underſtanding. When we reflect again upon his wiſdom and purity, his power and juſtice, contraſted with our own errors in opinion and offences in practice; it is impoſſible not to feel apprehenſion and alarm; not to fear his diſpleaſure and condemnation; not to aſpire after his approbation and favour.

Towards our fellow-creatures when inveſted with grandeur and authority, and ſtill more, if we are indebted to them for pro-

tection and kindneſs, it is always expected that we ſhould feel, and that we ſhould expreſs, reſpect and gratitude: and to be deficient in theſe ſentiments, and to refuſe or neglect the expreſſion of them, is always conſidered as the criterion of a corrupt heart. It is not mentioned but in terms of contempt or deteſtation. Towards our Creator then, to whom our obligations are ſo incomparably more important; and whoſe future favour is ſo infinitely more valuable to us; no man, who believes his exiſtence and his providence, will forget to be thankful for what has been received, and to petition for what his circumſtances may require. To this indeed, and in the changes and chances of life to repoſe our confidence in ſome ſuperior power; to deſire, to ſolicit, and to hope for his protection, the propenſity is ſo ſtrong and ſo univerſal, that it has been ſuppoſed to be involuntary and inſtinctive; not ſo much the reſult of obſervation and reaſoning, as the ſtamp and impreſſion of nature. That worſhip and homage ſhould be paid to the great parent of the univerſe; that each of the divine attributes ſhould produce a correſpondent affection in the human mind; that his

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juſtice ſhould excite our fear, and his mercy our hope: that his benevolence ſhould conciliate our love; and his truth ſupport our truſt and confidence; this again has been ſuppoſed to be as natural in itſelf, as that phyſical effects ſhould follow from their reſpective cauſes: it has been maintained to poſſeſs a fitneſs and harmony, analogous to that which ſubſiſts between the premiſes and the concluſion in the theorems of mathematical ſcience. And theſe ſentiments of the heart, though they ſhould never be expreſſed in the language of the lips, are praiſe, gratitude, and prayer.

If the devotion of the heart and the influence of religious principle upon the conduct be neceſſary, religious worſhip, or prayer, is equally neceſſary; becauſe without the latter, the former cannot be ſupported. Conviction alone does not always influence practice; becauſe it cannot always conquer the paſſions. Arguments, that ſeemed irreſiſtible in retirement and ſolitude, are found of little avail, when we again mix in the buſineſs and temptations of the world. The heart muſt be gained. Sentiment and affec-

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tion muſt be brought to the aid of reaſon; and conviction ſtrengthened by reflection and habit.

Such too is the conſtitution and the weakneſs of human nature, that whatever is not frequently and periodically brought to our recollection, is generally ſoon forgotten. Our capacities can retain only a limited number of ideas; and as new objects engage our attention, the old are neceſſarily neglected; and in a little time no more remembered. To this weakneſs, indeed, the heart is ſcarce leſs liable than the underſtanding. Not only the ſcholar is continually mortified by the want of what he has forgotten; but almoſt every man complains of the effects of time and abſence, in the decay of natural affection, and in the failure of attachment in his friends.

Nor will the conſequences of this weakneſs be any where more viſible, or more to be lamented, than with reſpect to the impreſſions of religion. There are ſo many objects in the world, which are ſuited to the gratification of our ſenſes, and which inflame our

paſſions by the proſpect of indulgence, that if we do not carefully renew the influence of religious principle, it will probably be ſoon over-powered: and unleſs we renew it regularly and periodically, we ſhall not renew it with due care or ſufficient effect. What we ſuppoſe may be done with equal convenience at any future time, we ſeldom do at preſent; and he who has no ſtated hour of prayer, it is to be feared, will ſoon ceaſe to perform any offices of devotion. It is thus that in time we may loſe, not only our habits of virtue, but our inclination to purſue it; that we ſhall either neglect what is due to our Creator and our fellow-creatures; or at leaſt the principle, which we conceive to give it merit and value.

The probability, on the contrary, that due attention to the offices of religion will enſure the performance of our duties in general, will be another of its important recommendations. No two objects can be more oppoſite than prayer and ſin; than rational devotion and deliberate tranſgreſſion. They cannot exiſt together. There is no reſtraint upon the practice of vice ſo effectual,

tual, as the frequent and regular performance of the rites of devotion. No man, after the recent commiſſion of a known ſin, could ever addreſs a prayer to heaven without a mixture of ſhame, and fear, and repentance: nor will any man, with his religious duties yet freſh in his memory, be eaſily perſuaded to tranſgreſs the laws, which his religion has preſcribed. If therefore our exerciſes of piety are ſo frequent, that no temptation can ſurpriſe us, but when one act of devotion is lately paſſed, or another approaching; we ſhall ſoon find ourſelves on all occaſions maſters of our paſſions and our conduct. Every ſentiment, indeed, which leads us to the act of prayer; or to the hope of ſucceſs in our petitions; at the ſame time enforces the neceſſity of purity of heart and integrity of life. How can we pray to God for pardon of our ſins, unleſs we reſolve to forſake them? How can we implore his bleſſings, unleſs we endeavour to deſerve them? The language of our ſcriptures ſpeaks in uniſon with the beſt concluſions of our reaſon. *We know that God heareth not ſinners; but if any man be a worſhipper of God, and do his will, him he heareth.*

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From theſe effects of prayer may naturally reſult, according to our apprehenſion, one of its greateſt recommendations, the probability of, what I have ventured to call, its efficacy and ſucceſs; the probability, that it will procure for us the attention and favour of heaven; either the bleſſings, which we have preſumed to ſolicit; or other advantages of equal value, and more adapted to our character and ſituation. If the regular and frequent repetition of our devotions poſſeſs the moral tendency that has been ſtated; if it ſo eſſentially contribute to *make us a clean heart, and to renew a right ſpirit within us*; then muſt it neceſſarily contribute to render us proper objects of the bounty of our Maker; to place us in a capacity to receive, what otherwiſe his wiſdom or juſtice might have with-held. It is by no means intended to maintain that our God will grant us temporal bleſſings, only in proportion as we are found to deſerve them. It is the excluſive prerogative of the Almighty often to beſtow, before any claim of juſtice can be made; and always without an equivalent. He gave us life without any merit on our part; and he may ſtill give what will render that life valu-

able and happy. Our piety and obedience may improve our claim to his favour; but they do not conſtitute the original foundation of that claim; nor can they of themſelves enſure its ſucceſs.

It muſt be obſerved too, that bleſſings delayed till we petition for them, beſt excite or preſerve the ſenſe of our dependence upon God; and when granted to our prayers at laſt, moſt effectually teach gratitude and obedience. The Almighty beſt knows the proper ſeaſon for granting his mercies; when they are beſt ſuited to our circumſtances; and when we are beſt prepared to profit by them. We may therefore continue to aſk till he ſees fit to beſtow. He may with wiſdom and juſtice grant to our repeated prayers, what he had denied to our firſt. It is thus that the conſideration of the divine nature and our own may juſtify that perſeverance in prayer, which our ſcriptures have enjoined; and teach us to hope for the efficacy, which they have promiſed.

If theſe notions of the nature and tendency of habitual devotion be well-founded,

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it will be attended alſo with another effect, which we conceive to be of the higheſt importance; it will render us capable of enjoying thoſe bleſſings, which our religion has promiſed to all *who attain to the reſurrection of the juſt.* That the true happineſs, as well as dignity, of our nature conſiſts, not in the gratification of our corporal and ſenſual appetites, but in the purity of our affections, and the improvement of our intellectual faculties, is the language of philoſophy, as well as of religion; the doctrine of reaſon, as well as revelation: and the ſame corrupt paſſions, which are injurious alike to our innocence and our peace in the preſent life, will, we conceive, deſtroy our reliſh, as well as our claim, to the joys of the life to come. The ſenſualiſt could find no gratification, where all enjoyments are pure and ſpiritual; where the objects, which formerly engaged his affections and ſupported his pleaſures, could no longer be found. The envious man, inſtead of comfort, would feel only an encreaſe of wretchedneſs. His miſery is always augmented, in proportion as he is ſurrounded with happineſs. They, on the contrary, who have learned to find pleaſure

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in beholding the virtue and purity of others, as well as in the poſſeſſion of their own; and whoſe habits of devotion have taught them to contemplate the perfections of the Deity, not only with reverence, but with delight; theſe alone are prepared, we believe, to enjoy the bleſſings of immortality, in the ſociety of *the ſpirits of juſt men made perfect*. Miſery, we ſuppoſe, to be the neceſſary conſequence of guilt, as well as its puniſhment; and happineſs the natural effect of innocence, as well as its reward. The language of our ſcriptures is, that *bleſſed are the pure in ſpirit; for they ſhall ſee God.*

Such are the general advantages which, we ſuppoſe, will reſult from the due diſcharge of the offices of devotion. But it may ſtill be urged, that theſe are rather its adventitious and collateral benefits, than its direct and proper effects. Theſe might be amongſt the cauſes why divine worſhip has been preſcribed as a duty by our religion; but they are not the actual motives on which the duty is performed. They are, at leaſt, not the principle, on which prayer, properly ſo called, is addreſſed to heaven. The true and

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the obvious reaſon, why we offer our petitions to the Deity, undoubtedly is, that we hope they may be granted; that we truſt they will procure for us ſuch favours and bleſſings, as we ſhould not otherwiſe have been permitted to obtain; and it is to this efficacy of prayer that the objection is made.

2. If, ſay the objectors, the Deity be, as he is repreſented, omniſcient; he muſt know our neceſſities before we aſk; and cannot become better acquainted with them by any information we can give him. If he be benevolent; he muſt be, from his own nature, as much diſpoſed to prevent or to alleviate our diſtreſſes, as our ſollicitations can make him: and if he be immutable, our petitions cannot produce any change in his attributes, his government, or his laws. But even ſuppoſing it not inconſiſtent with the power or the will of God, to hear the reaſonable ſupplications of his creatures; it cannot be poſſible for him to gratify at once the different and even contradictory petitions of different men; it cannot be expected that, in order to gratify them, he ſhould continually violate thoſe laws of nature, which he has himſelf

eſtabliſhed: and that of any ſuch violation, in conſequence of our prayers, the only unequivocal teſtimony, our own experience, cannot be produced.

In the abſtract this objection certainly appears very formidable; and perhaps the human underſtanding cannot furniſh a deciſive anſwer; an anſwer that ſhall completely remove the difficulty; and teach acquieſcence by conviction. But what our weak and limited intellects do not fully comprehend, does not therefore imply abſurdity, injuſtice, or impoſſibility. If we can offer ſuch conſiderations as may ſatisfy our own minds, or the minds of others, that the duty, which we believe our Creator to have commanded, is reaſonable in itſelf, and beneficial to mankind, we gain an important point; we perform an eſſential ſervice to ourſelves and to religion.

That the Deity knows our wants before we aſk, cannot be denied; and that his benevolence inclines him to relieve them, will not be queſtioned. But ſtill it may be required that ſomething ſhould be done on our

part, in order to obtain what we aſk; or what we ſhould have aſked, had we known, what is known to him; what on the whole is beſt and fitteſt for us. The Deity is generally underſtood to employ various means and inſtruments, to effect the beneficial purpoſes of his moral government of the world; and amongſt theſe may, without abſurdity, be ſuppoſed to be included our prayers and ſupplications. It may be eſſential to his goodneſs not to beſtow his bleſſings indiſcriminately and unconditionally; but under certain limitations required by his wiſdom or his juſtice; and theſe limitations may augment the bleſſings themſelves, or the enjoyments of him, on whom they are beſtowed. All the general recommendations of piety and devotion, which have been already ſtated, may be ſo many indiſpenſible qualifications for our receiving or profiting by ſuch favours, as it is the object of our petitions to obtain. Our title to his benevolence may be, and indeed ſeems to be, not abſolute, but conditional; it appears to be required that we ſhould poſſeſs certain qualities, and perform certain duties, in purſuit of his mercies; before we are permitted to receive

them. Such a principle ſeems to influence all the proceedings of the Deity with reſpect to his rational creatures. In ſuch a principle, perhaps, the cauſe muſt be ſought, why man was created with a capacity of doing evil, as well as good. He was not made certainly and neceſſarily virtuous and happy; becauſe it was required by the attributes of his Creator, that he ſhould be inſtrumental to his own happineſs or miſery, by his obedience or his tranſgreſſions. And it may be conſiſtent with the divine wiſdom, juſtice, or benevolence, to grant bleſſings to our prayers, which could not, conſiſtently with thoſe perfections, have been granted without them*.

* In the ſcriptures ſuch a principle appears to be recogniſed. In the old teſtament obedience and bleſſings ſeem to be conſidered as inſeparable. And when Ahab repented and humbled himſelf before God, the penalties, which had been threatened to his tranſgreſſions, were ſuſpended. The Almighty *would not bring the evil in his days; but in his ſon's days would he bring the evil upon his houſe.* 1 Kings xxi. 29. See alſo Jonah iii. In the new teſtament, to the centurion, who entreated his aſſiſtance, our Saviour ſaid, *as thou haſt believed, ſo be it done unto thee.* Matt. viii. 13. and in his own country he did *not many mighty works, becauſe of their unbelief.* Matt. xiii. 58.

That the nature and attributes of the Deity are in the ſtricteſt ſenſe immutable, will not be queſtioned. But whether immutability in the ſame ſenſe, and with the ſame ſtrictneſs, is applicable to his moral government of the world, may reaſonably be doubted. In every thing which admits a choice between right and wrong, the Deity muſt always do what is right: and in every thing, which admits degrees of good, we doubt not he will always do what is beſt. But we muſt be cautious how we limit his freedom or his power. And it ſeems no way inconſiſtent with the principles already allowed, that God in his dealings with men, ſhould at all times adapt them to their nature and ſituation: that ſomething ſhould be made to depend upon the choice of creatures, to whom, as being reſponſible for their actions, freedom of choice muſt have been allowed: that a change in the diſpoſition or the conduct of a moral agent, ſhould produce a correſpondent change in the treatment he receives from a moral governour: or that where the ſame beneficial purpoſes may be obtained by various means equally good, the preference ſhould be given accord-

ing to our obedience, our penitence, or our devotion.

That the ſupplications of different men are ſometimes abſurd in themſelves, and often inconſiſtent with each other, though it muſt be lamented, cannot be denied. But this circumſtance cannot affect the general propriety or the efficacy of prayer. Every human duty will be ſometimes weakly or negligently performed. But this makes no change in the nature of the duty itſelf; or in our obligation to perform it. It is always ſuppoſed, and in the very notion of prayer it is obviouſly implied, that the object of every petition is referred to the deciſion of him, to whom it is addreſſed; to be granted or denied, as his wiſdom ſhall determine. The rational petitioner does not mean to dictate, but to entreat. He begs for what he conceives to be a bleſſing; and on the ſuppoſition that it is really ſuch to himſelf, and not inconſiſtent either with the intereſts of his fellow-creatures, or the attributes of his Creator, hopes it may be granted to his ſupplications. The devout ſuppliant, indeed, of every perſuaſion, if he do not addreſs the

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ſame object of worſhip, muſt be ſuppoſed to addreſs him in the ſame ſpirit, as *the author and finiſher of our faith*; he muſt conclude every prayer in the language of humility and reſignation, *not as I will, but as thou wilt; not my will, but thine be done.*

That the Almighty will not for our ſakes, or at our ſolicitation, interfere with thoſe laws of the creation, which he has himſelf eſtabliſhed, is more than we are bound to admit. That viſible miracles are no longer vouchſafed to us, becauſe their purpoſe is accompliſhed, we readily acknowledge. We acknowledge too, that the courſe of cauſes and effects in the world ſhould not be frequently and openly diſturbed; becauſe a certain degree of confidence in the order and uniformity of nature is neceſſary to the well-being, and even to the ſubſiſtence, of mankind. But it is not therefore certain that thoſe laws are immutable and eternal. There is no proof that when they were ordained, it was ordained alſo, that they ſhould not for any cauſe, or on any occaſion, be afterwards changed or ſuſpended. The probability is, that the Creator would ſtill reſerve in his own

hands unlimited authority over his own creation. To our apprehenſion, indeed, this ſeems neceſſary; not only to his dignity and his benevolence; but to his moral government of the world. It is eaſy to conceive, and it is reaſonable to ſuppoſe, that the winds and the ſea may ſecretly obey him; that occaſionally the ſun may ſhine and the rain deſcend at his eſpecial command; that the earthquake and the lightning may be ſometimes directed to their object by his providence; and that each of theſe may become the inſtruments of our trial and probation; of reproof and chaſtiſement to the impious and diſobedient, and of favour and bleſſing to the juſt and good.

That we have no certain experience of any ſuch interference with the laws of nature, in conſequence of our ſupplications, muſt indeed be allowed; and we preſume the want of it may be juſtified. Such experience, if allowed at all, muſt either be conſtant and univerſal, or limited and occaſional. If not conſtant and univerſal, it does not appear that the objection in queſtion would by any means be removed. If known and apparent inſtances of the efficacy of prayer ought only to be occaſionally

caſionally allowed, for the inſtruction and encouragement of mankind in general; we maintain that ſuch inſtances are already recorded in our ſcriptures; and that he who is not ſatisfied with theſe, would probably remain without conviction, however the number might be enlarged. He indeed, who ſhould not obtain the experience in his own caſe, might ſtill diſpute its exiſtence in any other; or he might charge providence with injuſtice and partiality, in granting to other men, what was denied to him. He would ſtill be at liberty to urge every argument againſt ſuch efficacy, which can at preſent be urged againſt it; or to deny its reality on every principle, on which the truth of other miracles has ever been denied.

If, on the other hand, this experience were conſtant and univerſal; if it were aſcertained that ſucceſs would attend our prayers to heaven, with the ſame regularity that phyſical effects reſult from their reſpective cauſes; changes highly important in themſelves, and, as it ſhould ſeem, highly miſchievous in their conſequences, would be introduced into the ſyſtem of human life. Not

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to ſtate how much the ſolemnity of prayer muſt be degraded and debaſed; not to inſiſt on the confuſion that muſt inevitably enſue; would not this certainty ſhake the very foundation, or change the very nature of our faith and reſignation; of hope, of humility, and of every other ſentiment, which conſtitutes piety or duty towards God? Would men continue to labour for their ſubſiſtence, if it could with equal certainty be procured by prayer? Who would toil through the mazes of ſcience, or exert his own ſkill and diligence to eſcape danger and death, if prayer could equally purchaſe for him information or ſafety? Such regularity and certainty, indeed, in the efficacy of prayer, would not only be injurious to induſtry, to virtue, and to devotion; but would ſeem to take away all option from the Deity himſelf. It would not leave him in the diſpenſation of his own bleſſings, that exerciſe of his wiſdom; which we believe to be neceſſary to his moral government, and eſſential to the perfection of his nature. Our prayers, then, may ſtill be inſtrumental in procuring for us the favour and protection of the Almighty; though their efficacy is not confirmed by our own experience: and even

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the obſcurity reſpecting their influence, and the uncertainty of the event, may be more beneficial to ourſelves, than a decided confidence in their ſucceſs.

If theſe conſiderations, or any others that can be offered, will reconcile the efficacy of our prayers with the acknowledged attributes of him, to whom they are addreſſed; if any principles, that can be aſſumed, will ſhew that bleſſings may be granted to our petitions, which otherwiſe we could not have expected to obtain; then muſt the objection be conſidered as having received all the anſwer that ought to be required. This is probably all that the human underſtanding can effect. That our prayers will be efficacious, we muſt be content to learn from higher authority. If our reaſon can exculpate what we receive as a divine revelation, from the imputation of having enjoined a duty that is either uſeleſs or abſurd; the precepts of revelation conſtitute in return a deciſive obligation why the duty ſhould be performed. The profeſſors of every religion have admitted the propriety of prayer; and depended upon its influence with the object of their adoration: and Chriſtians

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in particular are not only required, by the commands of their God, to apply to him in their wants and diſtreſſes; but they are encouraged in the application, as well by promiſes that their petitions will be accepted, as by recorded inſtances, *written for our learning*, in which ſuch petitions have been efficacious and ſucceſsful.

3. Suppoſing it admitted, however, that ſufficient reaſons may be aſſigned for the practice of private prayer; the propriety or the neceſſity of public worſhip may ſtill be diſputed. But public or ſocial prayer may be defended or enforced on all the ſame grounds as private devotion; and as it poſſeſſes ſome additional advantages of its own, we ſhall be bound to the practice of it under additional obligations.

It ought to be conſidered as no light recommendation of public worſhip, that it has made a part of every known religion of the world. All civilized nations have had their temples, their altars, and their prieſts; their rites and ceremonies of religion, eſtabliſhed and protected by public authority: and theſe prove not

not only the exiſtence of ſocial worſhip, but the eſteem in which it was held; and the zeal and diligence, with which it was ſupported. How widely ſoever nations may have differed from each other in their religious opinions, and the articles of their faith; in this one point they have all agreed; that the people ſhould aſſemble at certain places, and at ſtated ſeaſons, for the purpoſes of general devotion; to unite in deprecating the diſpleaſure of heaven for the tranſgreſſion of its laws; in praiſes and thankſgivings for mercies received; and in ſupplications for bleſſings they deſired. To thoſe who maintain that all religion was derived originally from divine revelation, this unanimity in different nations will appear not more a recommendation of public worſhip, than another confirmation of their hypotheſis: but to thoſe who hold different ſentiments, it ſhould be an argument of no ſmall weight in favour of ſocial prayer, to find it authoriſed by the laws, and encouraged by the practice, of all the civilized nations of the world.

It will appear too, we truſt, upon due conſideration, that nations have not in this point acted

acted more uniformly than wisely; that public prayer is not more recommended by the general example of mankind, than by its own utility.

One of the first advantages of social prayer, as such, is that it animates and improves the piety of the individuals of the assembly. It was the opinion of Pythagoras and Thales, that attendance upon public worship encreased devotion; and I believe the experience of every good man will confirm the judgment of the philosophers. Our sentiments are always strengthened by the concurring sentiments of others; and every feeling of the heart is augmented by the corresponding feelings of those about us. The speculatist reposes new confidence in his theory, in proportion as he finds that numbers adopt his conclusions; and the soldier imbibes from his fellows the contagion of cowardice or courage. Thus will it be in our devotions. Our piety will always grow warmer, when associated with the piety of our fellow-creatures: The natural sympathy of kindred minds will spread through the assembly; and it is, we trust, acceptable to the Deity, that the subjects of his govern-

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ment ſhould join in ſupplications for bleſſings they jointly want; and that all ſhould unite in expreſſions of gratitude for mercies, which all have enjoyed. In whatever degree then public worſhip aſſiſts our weakneſs, and improves our piety; in whatever degree it renders our ſupplications more ſuited to their own purpoſes, and more worthy of him, to whom they are addreſſed; in the ſame degree will they become more likely to be acceptable and ſucceſsful. Whatever good effects are ſuppoſed to flow from private prayer; thoſe good effects muſt naturally be encreaſed, in proportion as our devotion is improved.

It will be the more incumbent upon us to attend the public ſervice of the church; becauſe we ſhall by ſuch attendance, exhibit a good example to others; and contribute to improve their devotion from the ſame ſympathy, by which our own has been improved. In order to render himſelf in the higheſt degree uſeful, and to produce the greateſt poſſible good; it is required of every member of ſociety, not only to diſcharge faithfully the duties of his ſtation, but to let his conduct and principles appear in their

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proper colours. Above all is this required of him in the offices of religion: not merely becauſe religion is the true baſis of happineſs, as well as of virtue; but becauſe it is a point in which example has the greateſt weight. The votaries of vice and impiety are never ſo effectually aſhamed and checked, as when the majority and the faſhion are againſt them. Many uſeful and valuable members of the community, who want learning or leiſure to examine for themſelves the evidence of Chriſtianity, have been led to believe its truth, by their deference for the judgment of the wiſe and good, who have believed it before them: And in the lower ranks of life we find a ſtill more numerous claſs of men who have hardly any other means of underſtanding or practiſing the duties of religion, than the inſtruction and example of their ſuperiors; and who, indeed, without ſuch example and inſtruction, would ſoon abandon all regard for the exerciſes of piety and devotion. But this inſtruction they can ſeldom hear, this example they can ſeldom obſerve, but in their attendance upon the public ſervice of the church. On hardly any other circumſtance, ſo much as on public

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prayer and ſocial worſhip, depend the good effects of Chriſtianity upon the principles, the conduct, and the happineſs of the great body of mankind.

It is indeed another powerful recommendation of ſocial worſhip, that it lays the beſt foundation for the ſocial virtues. It beſt teaches humanity and charity. When we aſſemble for the worſhip of the great Creator, from whoſe dignity and perfections we are all at an immeaſurable, and almoſt equal, diſtance; the circumſtances, by which we are diſtinguiſhed from each other, appear of little importance. Whatever is offenſive in the different ranks of ſociety is ſoftened or forgotten. The rich man abates his pride, and the poor man his envy; and each retires from the public aſſembly with better diſpoſitions than he came. When we reflect that we are all dependent upon the bounty of our maker, and all uniting in the ſame ſupplications for his mercy; that we are all equally haſtening to the place, where all temporal diſtinctions ſhall ceaſe; and where our ſentence for happineſs or miſery will depend, not upon the dignity or meanneſs of the

ſtation we have filled, but on the manner in which its duties have been performed; we cannot then look upon each other as ſtrangers, rivals, or enemies; but rather as the ſons of the ſame common parent, with the ſame common intereſt to purſue; and which will always be moſt ſucceſsfully purſued by mutual kindneſs, ſupport, and aſſiſtance. When we pray for each other and for all mankind, it will remind us, not only how diligently we ſhould endeavour to ſecure for one another the bleſſings for which we petition; but that we may probably be as much indebted to the prayers of our fellow-creatures, as to their moſt active ſupport; and that the Almighty may have appointed our happineſs to depend upon each other, as much in our devotions, as in the tranſactions of common life. Conſiderations, like theſe, inſeparable from ſocial worſhip, muſt naturally meliorate the heart; they will produce the diſpoſition that religion requires; and fit us to perform the duties which it has commanded.

It muſt be yet further obſerved that as the Almighty is the ſole diſpenſer of bleſſings to

mankind; of thoſe which we receive or hope collectively, as members of a community; no leſs than of thoſe which we enjoy in our ſeparate capacity, as individuals; it becomes our duty to offer him correſpondent homage for the former, as well as the latter. We are not more bound to prayer or praiſe in the cloſet, for private and domeſtic comforts; than in the temple, for the general advantages of the ſociety, in which his providence has placed us. The wiſdom and equity of general laws; and the integrity and clemency of princes and magiſtrates; the fertility of ſeaſons; the continuance of peace and tranquillity; and above all, the purity and preſervation of religion; theſe, and ſuch as theſe, conſtitute public obligations to the Deity, which ought to be publicly acknowledged. It is natural, and it is rational, that, on one hand, national judgments for tranſgreſſion ſhould be deprecated by national penitence and humiliation; and that, on the other, national benefits ſhould be ſolicited or acknowledged in the general and united devotions of the people.

4. Theſe are ſome of the more obvious

and important advantages of public worſhip and ſocial prayer. Let us now proceed to conſider the uſe and propriety of prayer in precompoſed and preſcribed forms; and what will naturally belong to the ſubject; to examine a few of the objections, on which ſuch forms are ſometimes cenſured and condemned.

In ſupport of precompoſed and preſcribed forms of prayer may in the firſt place be urged the ſtriking defects of thoſe which are occaſional and unpremeditated. They are generally mean, extravagant, and incoherent; ſometimes ludicrous or impious; and almoſt always unworthy of their place and their object. Their fitneſs and propriety, indeed, depend wholly upon the judgment, the temper, the learning, and the creed of the miniſter; and Baxter has obſerved, that he who holds erroneous opinions, generally puts his errors into his prayers.

Were it poſſible, however, to render theſe prayers unexceptionable in their doctrines, their language, and their compoſition; ſtill there are abſurdities inſeparable from their

nature and their uſe. The unwritten or unpremeditated prayer of the miniſter is itſelf a preſcribed form to the people; and even the novelty, or the expectation of it, which rouſes or gratifies their minds, withdraws them from the proper object of worſhip. It is not to be ſuppoſed, indeed, that the hearer can duly attend to his devotions, while his whole attention is employed to catch the ſentiments of the ſpeaker; or that he can rationally or cordially join in petitions, before he clearly underſtands their propriety or their purpoſe.

In defence of eſtabliſhed forms of prayer muſt in the next place be urged their own fitneſs and utility. The ſentiments and the language, which we addreſs to our Creator, ought ſurely to be as correct and reſpectful, as that which we addreſs to the moſt exalted of our fellow-creatures: and for the ſake of the congregation, they ought to be ſuch as may not offend either the ear or the underſtanding; as may not provoke diſguſt, where they ought to excite devotion: and ſuch ſurely will be beſt prepared, not by the haſty ſuggeſtions of the moment, but by that pre-

vious meditation and ſtudy, which the ſolemnity of the ſubject ſo obviouſly demands.

An eſtabliſhed form too teaches the ignorant what to pray for as they ought; and becomes valuable to them, not only as ſuitable language for their devotion, but as inſtruction in its principles. It confines the wild and enthuſiaſtic to ſuch objects as are reaſonable in themſelves, and adapted to the ſituation of their hearers; and it enables all to come prepared to join with ſincerity and reverence in the ſupplications of the congregation.

But the moſt deciſive argument in defence of precompoſed and preſcribed forms of prayer is the example of thoſe, to whoſe authority on the ſubject the greateſt deference ſhould be paid. The antient Jews, of whoſe religion the ritual, as well as the doctrines, was of divine inſtitution, not only employed eſtabliſhed forms of devotion; but there is every reaſon to believe that in their public worſhip ſuch only were admitted. The example of our Saviour ought to decide every queſtion

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on which it can be produced: and it may be ſhewn that he regularly attended the ſynagogues of the Jews; and united with them in all the ceremonies of their religion, which the law required. The apoſtles, who muſt be allowed to have beſt underſtood the inſtructions of their maſter; and the Chriſtians of the firſt centuries, who muſt be ſuppoſed to have adhered the moſt ſtrictly to the directions of the apoſtles; all theſe, like the Jews before them, not only employed precompoſed and preſcribed forms of prayer; but like them too, excluded every other from the regular ſervice of their churches *. Authorities, like theſe, we admit, cannot be expected to influence the adverſaries of Chriſtianity; but they ought to have the utmoſt weight with all who profeſs to believe it: and with ſuch only can we be ſuppoſed at preſent to contend. They will at leaſt ſupport our own approbation of our own practice; and confirms us in our attachment to the ceremonies of our national church.

* Theſe ſeveral points are amply proved by Lightfoot, Gregory, Bennet, and Hooker.

5. Notwithſtanding theſe obvious and powerful recommendations of eſtabliſhed forms of prayer, they are ſometimes cenſured and condemned. Objections are brought againſt them, which it becomes our duty to refute; not ſo much, indeed, on account of the native force of the objections themſelves; as becauſe every thing riſes into importance, by which the intereſts of religion are in any degree affected.

To theſe forms, then, it is in the firſt place objected; that they cannot always be adapted to the circumſtances of each of thoſe individuals, of whom the congregation is compoſed; and conſequently that he cannot be expected to join in them with due zeal and fervour, whoſe immediate and perſonal intereſt they are not likely to promote.

To this it may be replied, that when the objection ſuppoſes precompoſed and preſcribed forms not to ſuit the circumſtances of each individual, it ſuppoſes what is not frequently the caſe: and even where the ſuppoſition happens to be well founded, the objection

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is ſtill rather captious than important; rather ſpecious than juſt. Public forms of prayer are certainly general; becauſe they are intended for the uſe of numbers, and directed to the general good. Yet will they commonly apply with ſufficient accuracy to the ſituation of every member of the ſociety. One man does not differ very widely from another. Our wants and our weakneſſes, our temptations and our tranſgreſſions, in the preſent life are not very diſſimilar; and for the life to come our hopes and proſpects are the ſame, and founded on the ſame baſis. It cannot therefore be difficult to frame addreſſes to heaven, in which all may join with ſincerity and devotion. Where the circumſtances of individuals are ſo peculiar as to require peculiar addreſſes, theſe are the proper ſubjects of private devotion; ſuited to the cloſet more than the temple. Public forms cannot juſtly be cenſured for not including, what in its own nature could not be included. And let it not be forgotten, that beſides our occaſional offices, adapted to all the ordinary contingencies of human life; whenever extraordinary afflictions, or extraordinary mercies, have been experienced by

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any of her members, our church permits them to make a part of her public ſervice; to be ſpecified amidſt her general petitions, or general thankſgivings.

With reſpect to our own liturgy, indeed, though in it, as in every other human compoſition, imperfections may certainly be found; yet its general and ſuperior excellence may be very ſafely maintained. It is ſo comprehenſive in its objects, that little can be added; and ſo exact, that little need be changed. Its ſupplications, indeed, are ſo general and liberal, that almoſt every man may join in them without ſcruple; and yet ſo minute, that hardly a ſingle want of a ſingle individual is overlooked. The variations in the ſervice are judiciouſly calculated to preſerve or to reſtore attention; but without thoſe capricious and ſudden tranſitions, by which ſolemnity would be deſtroyed. The principles it every where inculcates or implies are equally remote from the oppreſſive terrors of ſuperſtition, and the indecent familiarities of enthuſiaſm. Its devotional language is ſufficiently animated to correſpond to the warmeſt piety of the Chriſtian; and

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yet ſo rational and ſedate, that the moſt diſpaſſionate philoſopher cannot tax it with intemperance; and whatever bleſſings it ſolicits, whether public or private, temporal or eternal; it never forgets the deference due to divine wiſdom; and begs to have *all our deſires and petitions fulfilled only as may be moſt expedient for us.*

It is again objected to precompoſed and preſcribed forms of prayer; that theological doctrines are continually declared or implied in them, which are not reconcilable to the private ſentiments of individuals; and conſequently that ſuch individuals cannot join in the general ſupplications. They cannot offer addreſſes to heaven, which violate their own opinions and conviction.

To this objection it is in the firſt place replied; that eſtabliſhed forms of prayer are intended for thoſe only, whoſe private ſentiments they are known or ſuppoſed not to offend. Of ſocial worſhip and preſcribed forms it is obviouſly the baſis, the nature, and the deſign, that they who agree in their religious opinions, ſhould unite in their rites of devotion.

tion. Even thoſe who are loudeſt in their complaints againſt the uſe of ſuch eſtabliſhed forms, in one inſtance, at leaſt, admit the principle, on which they are founded and defended. They allow the uſe of the prayer dictated by our Redeemer. This prayer too, when examined by the rules of ſound criticiſm and ſound ſenſe, appears to be; not a prayer deſigned to exclude all others; but a model, by which others might be formed. Its purpoſe expreſsly was, to correct the vain repetitions of the Heathens and the Jews in their devotions; and to inſtruct the diſciples of Chriſt to addreſs themſelves to the ſupreme Being with more decency and propriety. And we ſhall be convinced the compoſition is worthy of its purpoſe and its author, if we conſider its ſentiments and its merits; its comprehenſion, united with its conciſeneſs; its dignity with its ſimplicity; its piety towards God, with its benevolence to man*.

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* That the Lord's prayer was intended, not as an excluſive form, but as a model, appears probable on ſeveral accounts. 1. From the nature of the caſe. So conciſe a compoſition could hardly be intended to conſtitute the whole of our devotion; it could hardly apply to all the various wants

In the next place it muſt be obſerved, in anſwer to the objection, that from no form of prayer to God, can theological doctrines be wholly excluded. To impreſs the mind

wants and various circumſtances of mankind; and it does not include any thankſgiving. 2. When Chriſt dictated the prayer, he did not uſe any expreſſions of excluſion; and the circumſtances, under which it was introduced, favour more the notion of its being a model for other addreſſes to the Deity. 3. The ſeveral petitions, of which it conſiſts, were borrowed from the eſtabliſhed forms of prayer in uſe amongſt the Jews; and this circumſtance appears to imply, not that all ſuch forms ſhould in future be aboliſhed, but that they ſhould be regulated and improved. 4. In other paſſages of his goſpel, our Saviour directs his diſciples to aſk in his name: but in this prayer his name is not mentioned: nor is there even an alluſion to his character or his office, his ſufferings or his merits. And they are not alluded to, probably, becauſe they were not at that time rightly underſtood by his diſciples. 5. Our Saviour himſelf on different occaſions employed different forms; and thoſe forms adapted to their reſpective occaſions. Mat. xxvi. 39. and John xvii. 1. 6. St. Paul alſo employs prayers ſuited to their reſpective objects, and directs his converts to do the ſame. Rom. i. 10. 2 Cor. xii. 8. 1 Tim. ii. 1. 2. Epheſ. vi. 19. 7. It does not appear that any of the apoſtles confined themſelves, or directed their converts to be confined, to this form, to the excluſion of all others. 8. If it be proper to employ prayers at all; it muſt be proper to employ ſuch as are ſuited to the purpoſes, for which they are employed.

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with juſt ſentiments of the ſupreme Being, is one of the great purpoſes for which divine worſhip is ordained; and without ſome conformity of private ſentiments no offices of devotion can be performed without abſurdity. All who unite in prayer to the Almighty muſt alike believe his exiſtence and his providence; and when they beg for bleſſings, muſt equally admit his power and his will to beſtow them. All, indeed, who join in the act of prayer, muſt be underſtood to entertain the ſame hope that God will hear them; and this hope built on the ſame foundation; on the ſuppoſed efficacy of their own ſupplications, or of the interceſſion of a mediator. If they ſolicit pardon for their tranſgreſſions, they muſt agree in opinion reſpecting not only the poſſibility that ſuch pardon may be obtained, but the means and conditions, on which it may be expected.

If then theological doctrines cannot be wholly excluded from public forms of devotion; and if ſome conformity of private ſentiments be neceſſary to ſocial worſhip; the only queſtion remaining will be, in what degree, and in what detail, it may be proper

to admit the former; and how far the ground of the latter ſhould be narrowed or extended. And unleſs the day ſhall come, when one ſyſtem of faith ſhall be univerſally received, and uniformly underſtood; theſe points will not be eaſily decided, upon any general principle, or to the general ſatisfaction. For the ſake of peace and tranquillity, however, in the mean time, they muſt be determined; either by each ſociety for itſelf of thoſe who agree to unite in the ſame ceremonies of worſhip, or, where there is an eſtabliſhed religion, by the ſupreme authority of the ſtate.*

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* One of the moſt frequent objections to eſtabliſhed forms of prayer is, that they become ſo well known and familiar, as rather to occaſion wearineſs and languor, than to preſerve attention or excite devotion. But the objection is evidently fallacious or inconcluſive. It is founded, not upon any inherent defects ſhewn to be inſeparable from eſtabliſhed forms of prayer, but upon an abuſe, to which ſuch forms are liable: and it is directed, not ſo much againſt the mode of addreſſing our ſupplications to heaven, as againſt our weakneſs or negligence. On the ſame ground indeed an objection might be urged againſt every duty, which human beings are required to perform. The objection reſts wholly on the ſuppoſition that men contract bad habits in the diſcharge of their religious duties; and conſequently where better habits are contracted, the objection can have

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With reſpect to the more general ſubject of the preſent diſquiſition; to deny the exiſtence of the connection between the act of prayer and its influence with the Almighty, only becauſe we cannot perceive it; or to aſſert that his attributes render it impoſſible for him to be affected by our ſupplications; this ſeems hardly leſs unphiloſophical, than it is raſh and preſumptuous. With the nature of the connection between cauſe and effect we are in all caſes but imperfectly acquainted; and we do not comprehend the attributes of the Deity with ſufficient clearneſs, to be able to pronounce with confidence what will be the reſult of their exerciſe in the regulation of the moral world. Of the Creator it is the undoubted privilege to govern his own creation. To his omniſcience it muſt be an eaſy taſk, to hear the petitions of all his ſubjects

no foundation. The proper refutation of it, indeed, is not ingenuity of argument, but fervency of devotion. The act of prayer ſhould be conſidered rather as the effect, than the cauſe, of piety. It is true that what men do frequently, they are apt to do with negligence. And it is not pretended, that eſtabliſhed forms of prayer are liable to no abuſe or objection; but that every other mode of devotion is attended with greater inconveniences, and does not poſſeſs equal advantages.

here on earth: and to his juſtice it can be no difficulty, to decide with equity in caſes the moſt complicated and extenſive. To his omnipotence it can be no labour, to watch the operations of nature, and to direct every event to the accompliſhment of his own purpoſes; and to his benevolence it will give no pain, to grant to the devout ſuppliant whatever is fit to be granted; whatever is compatible with his preſent and future welfare; with his own, and the general good.

If then there be any weight in the arguments that have been adduced; if the conſiderations, that have been offered, appear reaſonable and juſt; we may ſtill continue to addreſs our petitions to our Creator, without any apprehenſion that he can want the power or the will to hear us. And in whatever degree our devotion can be improved in propriety or fervour, by our union in public worſhip, or by previous preparation and ſtudy; in the ſame degree may we be animated with the hope, that our ſupplications will be acceptable to their object. While we perform the duty of prayer, in obedience to the authority of our ſcriptures, we may depend upon that efficacy

and ſucceſs from our petitions, which thoſe ſcriptures have promiſed. What we aſk in the name of the Son of God, if we aſk what we ought, by his interceſſion, and for his ſake, that ſhall we receive.

SERMON VIII.

THE GOOD EFFECTS OF CHRISTIANITY ON THE FAITH AND MORALS OF ITS PROFESSORS.

1 PET. ii. 12.

Having your converſation honeſt among the Gentiles; that whereas they ſpeak againſt you as evil-doers; they may by your good works, which they ſhall behold, glorify God in the day of viſitation.

THAT the Chriſtian revelation was intended to rectify the faith, and to improve the morals, of mankind, will not be doubted by any man, who can peruſe the volumes, in which its hiſtory and its doctrines are recorded. But in what degree it has effected its own purpoſes has been frequently made the ſubject of diſpute: and the infidel and

the ſceptic have founded an objection to its truth or credibility, on its ſuppoſed failure in theſe important points. It has not, they aſſert, produced even in its followers, that improvement and purity of character and conduct; which its precepts profeſs to teach, and which its own predictions promiſed. So far indeed from having accompliſhed an object ſo ſalutary and deſireable, they maintain that it has rather been the cauſe of diſcord and diſſention, of perſecution and of war; an inſtrument of fraud, ambition and tyranny in the hands of prieſts and princes, and a ſource of ſlavery, ſuperſtition and depravity in the people. They conclude, therefore, that a religion, which fails ſo greatly in its own aim and object, cannot reaſonably be ſuppoſed to have ſprung from a divine original, or to enjoy the divine protection; but rather that thoſe who profeſs, do not themſelves ſincerely believe it; as their conduct deviates ſo widely from its laws.

I. Of this objection it will be more than have the refutation to trace its riſe and continuance to fallacy and error; to account fairly for its exiſtence, without admitting its truth.

truth. But we can alſo give the more deciſive anſwer, that it is not ſupported by facts well authenticated and candidly ſtated; that Chriſtianity has in no ſmall degree produced the good effects it profeſſes to promote; that it has diminiſhed the crimes, and encreaſed the virtues, of mankind.

1. It may in the firſt place be obſerved, that the very principle, on which the objection is founded, is in ſeveral reſpects ſuſpicious and deluſive. It is drawn not from any difficulty ſhewn to be inherent in the religion itſelf; but from a ſuppoſed deficiency in the effects it ought to produce. It does not judge of thoſe effects by the faireſt and moſt natural criterion, the conduct of thoſe who act conſiſtently with the rules which their religion has preſcribed; but it raſhly condemns Chriſtianity itſelf; becauſe men are found who violate the laws they profeſs to obey. It does not call in queſtion the truth of the revelation, by ſhewing its native incredibility, or the inſufficiency of its evidence; but merely inſiſts upon the faults and frailties of its followers. It does not even pretend that theſe faults and frailties are univerſal amongſt

them; but from the diſobedience of a few immediately infers the inſincerity of all: and it ſuppoſes, what ought never to be ſuppoſed, that a man's moral conduct is a deciſive teſt of his religious principles; that he lives as well as he believes. An objection then ſo fallacious in its foundation, and its nature ſo inconcluſive, ought not ſurely to have much weight in deciding ſo important a queſtion, as the truth or falſhood of the Chriſtian revelation.

2. One great reaſon why the lives of Chriſtians do not always correſpond to their religion is that freedom of mind and action; without which, reſponſibility for their conduct could not have been reaſonable or juſt. Chriſtianity is a ſyſtem, not of compulſion, but perſuaſion; not of force and neceſſity, but of liberty and choice. For it is a ſyſtem, by which moral merit is to be obtained, that happineſs may be its reward; or moral guilt incurred, and miſery juſtly become its puniſhment. The ſcriptures have preſcribed the rules of our duty towards God and towards man: and for our trial and probation, we are to guide and govern the propenſities of nature

ture by the precepts of revelation; or at the hazard of violating the precepts of revelation, to indulge the propenſities of nature. Impelled then by paſſions impatient for indulgence; and ſurrounded with temptations, by which thoſe paſſions are continually excited; frequently perplexed between the attractions of inclination, and the dictates of duty; and not ſeldom deceived by appearances that promiſe to reconcile them; is it to be wondered that we ſhould ſometimes tranſgreſs the laws, we confeſs ourſelves bound to obey, and practiſe what our religion condemns; that we ſhould furniſh to thoſe, who wiſh to find it, a ſpecious pretence for ſuſpecting either the authenticity of what we receive as a divine revelation, or the ſincerity of our faith and profeſſion.

3. Theſe defects of conduct, again, appear ſtill more ſtriking, when contraſted with the purity of the rules, by which our actions ought to have been directed; and with the important ſanctions, by which thoſe rules are enforced. When the precepts of our duty are conſidered, as delivered by revelation, the mind ſpontaneouſly admits their truth and

excellence. We find a ſyſtem of conduct preſcribed ſo extenſive and perſpicuous, that it may direct every man in every ſituation of life; ſo adapted to our nature and ſituation, that the performance ſeems as eaſy, as it is juſt; and ſo humane and benevolent, that it might be expected to ſilence for ever the voice of enmity and hoſtility, and to unite all the ſons of men in concord and peace. This ſyſtem too is enforced by ſanctions of ſuch infinite extent and value, as ſhould ſeem ſufficient to decide at once the queſtion between duty and diſobedience, and to fix our reſolution immoveably on the ſide of virtue and religion.

But when we again turn our eyes upon the world, we ſee not only the profeſſors of Chriſtianity ſeparated into different kingdoms, hoſtile to each other in their ſentiments and policy; but each of thoſe kingdoms again divided into various ſects and ſocieties, with tenets and intereſts the moſt oppoſite and irreconcileable: we ſee individuals too the ſlaves of their paſſions; envious, ambitious, and ſelfiſh; hazarding all the terrors of eternity for petty acquiſitions and ſenſual gratifi-

cations;

cations; and the contrast between what men are, and what they ought to be; between what they practise, and what their religion teaches; gives indeed too plausible a ground to assert, that revelation has not produced that improvement in human conduct, which its predictions, as well as its precepts, had taught us to expect.

4. Another specious ground for the same objection is found in the different nature of virtue and vice. Virtue is always modest, silent, and peaceable; vice often forward, loud, and ostentatious. The good man, satisfied with the approbation of his conscience and his God, does not *sound a trumpet before his alms, nor appear unto men to fast.* Nor do acts of virtue naturally possess those striking features and impressive qualities, which forcibly engage the attention, and agitate the passions: and however, therefore, they may be esteemed and loved within the circle of their influence, they do not in general command extensive notice or loud acclamation. But the vices, the riot, and the ambition of the wicked, their crimes, and their consequences, force themselves upon our notice;

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work powerfully on the imagination; and are therefore remembered and recorded. Hence it is that the hiſtory of mankind appears at firſt ſight to be little elſe than the hiſtory of their crimes; and a careleſs and ſuperficial obſerver might be led to form concluſions from it, very erroneous in themſelves, and very injurious to the morality and the nature of the human race. And by a ſimilar deluſion many from the tranſgreſſions of Chriſtians have been ſeduced into opinions equally unfounded; equally unfavourable to the truth or the utility of the Chriſtian revelation.

5. The beneficial influence of Chriſtianity is again diſputed by means of a compariſon between the faults and tranſgreſſors of its profeſſors, and the merit and virtues of certain individuals, who doubt or deny its being a divine revelation. Such a compariſon, however, is not only invidious and uncandid; as it compares the worſt of thoſe who profeſs our religion, with the beſt of thoſe who reject it; but is in every other reſpect fallacious and inconcluſive. Wherever Chriſtianity is the eſtabliſhed religion of the coun-

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try, numbers will always profeſs it from far other motives than conviction of its truth, or principles of piety: merely, for example, becauſe it is the eſtabliſhment; or becauſe they have been educated in the profeſſion of it; becauſe they look upon ſome religion as an uſeful engine of authority over the populace; or becauſe it is a requiſite qualification to obtain the honours and emoluments of the ſtate. Almoſt all, in ſhort, who have no real religion, will profeſs that which the law requires. And as ſuch men do not apply, or intend to apply it, to the regulation of their morals; it is no wonder their conduct ſhould often violate its principles, and diſgrace its character.

On the contrary too individuals may certainly be ſelected, from thoſe that *make profeſſion of unbelief*, whoſe lives are decent and regular; who are guilty of no atrocious outrage againſt the peace of ſociety, or the rules of good morals. For individuals may be found, whoſe poſſeſſions ſupply them in abundance with all thoſe luxuries, which it is generally the object of crimes to obtain; or whoſe paſſions are conſtitutionally ſo moderate,

derate, that prudence and policy alone are sufficient to confine them within due bounds, who are well aware, that in point of health or fortune, character or personal safety, they should sacrifice greater advantages, than they could hope to obtain, by more licentious and more criminal indulgence. But surely a few instances, from the influence of causes such as these, or a comparison built upon them, however magnified by artifice, or credited by weakness; can prove nothing against the general tendency, or general utility, of the Christian revelation.

6. The same objection is again urged against Christianity by men, who seem to have been led to doubt or deny, its beneficial influence, by having sought it, where it was by no means most likely to be found. We are apt to form our estimate of the morals of an age, of its comparative improvement or degeneracy, from its most conspicuous transactions; from such as engage the pen of the historian, and impress themselves forcibly on the mind; from the debates and resolutions of public assemblies; or the intrigues and contentions of the ambitious and the powerful;

powerful; from the negotiations of embassadors, and the hostilities of rival nations. But it is not here that the good effects of revelation should be sought; it is not here that its efficacy can be fairly tried. Where the strongest temptations continually excite the most impetuous passions of the human mind, the milder voice of religion will seldom be heard; the influence of its morality will be felt the last and the least.

From the tumults and the iniquities of public transactions let the enquirer turn his attention to the middle and inferior ranks of life; to the sentiments and conduct of the obscure inhabitant of the village, of the manufacturer at his anvil, and the husbandman in his fields; and he will there find a considerable proportion of those effects, which the benignant nature of the gospel would teach him to expect. He will there find mutual charity more rationally practised, and more widely diffused; the principles of good morals better understood, and founded on a firmer basis; more effectual controul of appetite; manners more gentle and humane; and greater probity in the ordinary intercourse

courſe between man and man. He will find minds better prepared for the viciſſitudes of life, from a better dependence on the care of providence; greater reſignation to the diſpenſations of the Almighty, from an improved knowledge of his juſtice and benevolence; and above all, a purer and more rational devotion; with greater hope and conſolation under the infirmities of age, and the approach of death. By the ſuperficial obſerver, indeed, theſe great and good effects will not be found; by the moſt attentive and acute their full benefit and value cannot be preciſely aſcertained; and in the page of the hiſtorian they either do not appear at all; or appear only with tranſient notice and inadequate diſplay. It is not to be wondered, therefore, that their reality has been queſtioned, or their extent and importance denied.

It is true, however, that the moral effects of Chriſtianity cannot be conſidered as compleat, till it has influenced public, as well as private, tranſactions; the conduct of nations, as well as of individuals. But this will be, though its greateſt, probably its

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lateſt triumph; for this can be brought about only through the medium of private character: and will therefore be a change not rapid in its progreſs, and viſible at every ſtep; but gradual in its advances, and perceptible only when conſiderable effects have been produced. Uſages and inſtitutions highly repugnant to the ſpirit of Chriſtianity may long remain; if either the general habits of a nation, or the intereſt of powerful individuals continue to ſupport them. The hand of induſtry may change the face of a country in a few years; but to change the ſentiments and manners of a people often requires as many generations. The political conduct of men muſt at laſt, however, take its colour from their morals. Whenever the virtues of the individual in private life are fixed and confirmed on the principles of true religion, he will carry them along with him into power and authority. Whenever the people in general are upright and religious; the government cannot long be iniquitous in its conſtitution, or corrupt in its adminiſtration. And whenever independent nations ſhall be equally influenced by Chriſtianity, unjuſtifiable plans of policy will not be mutually practiſed, and mutually

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provoked. That ſuch is the natural tendency of our religion will not be queſtioned; and how far theſe principles have already produced their effects, or are likely to produce them, ſhall hereafter be enquired*.

7. It

* It would be an enquiry by no means without curioſity or importance, to examine in what degree the good effects of the Chriſtian revelation have been counteracted and retarded; not merely by the errors and vices of private individuals; but by conſpicuous and extraordinary inſtances of human folly or depravity; by the intrigues of ſtateſmen, and the regulations of policy. For the three firſt centuries Chriſtianity obtained no civil eſtabliſhment: it was frequently perſecuted, and at beſt but tolerated; and could hardly therefore have any great and viſible effect on national morality or national character. For the four following centuries the barbarians of the north overwhelmed almoſt all the civilized world; and in the general wreck of ſcience Chriſtianity was obſcured, and almoſt forgotten. During this interval too the ſucceſsful ambition of Mahomet over-ran the Eaſtern part of Chriſtendom, and corrupted the religion of the goſpel; and it is ſtill held in bondage to the ſucceſſors of his impoſture and authority. How far the progreſs of Chriſtianity in Europe was during the ſame period retarded by the papal uſurpations, it may be difficult to determine. But it is obvious that an eſſential injury, for a time at leaſt, muſt be done to the cauſe by the revolution in France. For what wiſe purpoſes, and to what extent, providence may permit

7. It is again maintained that Chriſtianity, far from having produced the purity and peace it ſeems to promiſe, has been the perpetual ſource of diſcord and diſſention; that it has been the cauſe of perſecution and of war; and eventually of almoſt every crime and cruelty, which diſturbs ſociety, or diſgraces human nature.

That variety of opinions, and conſequently diſcord and diſſention, might reaſonably be expected reſpecting religion and its doctrines, has been already ſhewn. But it was ſhewn at the ſame time, that ſuch variety was no fair ground of objection to the evidence or the utility of Chriſtianity; nor any imputation to the wiſdom or benevolence of its author; that it was a probable and almoſt inevitable conſequence of the nature of revelation and the nature of man *.

That Chriſtianity has been the cauſe of perſecution and of war, with their reſpec-

permit ſuch events, it is not for human wiſdom to decide. But we hope and believe that over ſuch oppoſition and ſuch crimes truth and religion will finally triumph.

* In Sermon I.

tive trains of crimes and cruelties, if true at all, is true only under very great limitations. The professors of Christianity were not the original authors of religious persecution; for Pagans persecuted Pagans long before the Redeemer appeared in the world. Amongst the Persians all who did not profess the doctrines of Zoroaster were persecuted almost to extermination; and in Egypt, the worship of different deities produced severe and sanguinary contests between their respective votaries. The Roman emperors, with their council of philosophers, persecuted the Christians, long before the Christians betrayed any disposition to persecute each other.

The only persecution, for which Christianity can be responsible, if it be responsible for any, must be where men have persecuted with sincerity, for religion and for conscience sake. Of such persecutors, however, the number has probably either never been great; or it has been formed of such as were not the primary authors and advisers of such a mode of conversion or of punishment; but of such as were the followers and the dupes of leaders,

leaders, whoſe real views and motives were of a very different nature; but who found it convenient to pretend a zeal for the intereſts of Chriſtianity. But whatever have been the motives, the zeal, or the errors of its profeſſors, the goſpel itſelf contains no injunction for its own propagation by force and compulſion; and ought not therefore to be cenſured for what it has no where commanded.

With reſpect to the laws, which, in ſo many countries and on ſo many occaſions, have been enacted, to ſupport the eſtabliſhments of Chriſtianity; and againſt which the charge of intolerance and perſecution has been ſo vehemently urged; it cannot be ſhewn that Chriſtianity itſelf is accountable either for their principle or their effects. They appear to have proceeded, from the general wiſh of all who have obtained power to keep poſſeſſion of it; from their deſire to preſerve the peace and tranquillity of the country, in which they hold the pre-eminence; or from a ſuppoſition of its being their duty to guard or to propagate by their authority, that doctrine and worſhip, which they deemed eſſential to

the virtue and happineſs of the people. But whatever difference of opinion may be entertained reſpecting the equity, the wiſdom, or the piety of thoſe laws, or the principles from which they have proceeded; no cenſure ought to fall on the religion itſelf; for though it may have been the occaſion of them, it has not been the only or the principal motive; it has been the ſubject, not the cauſe.

Of the wars which have been called religious, and of which our religion has been ſuppoſed to be the ſole author and origin, the real motives have generally been perſonal or political; and the goſpel only the pretext to diſguiſe the views of intereſt or ambition, or to gain proſelytes to their cauſe. The war of the League, which deſolated France for near half a century, was begun and continued, if we are to believe the hiſtorian* who was beſt able to determine the point, not from the enmity of diſcordant doctrines in religion; not from zeal for the purity of the Chriſtian faith; but from the ambition, the intrigues, and animoſities of contending factions. And

* Davila.

even

even the Crusades themselves had their origin less in concern for the honour of Christianity, than in the avarice and ambition of the Roman pontiffs.

These considerations are by no means intended to justify persecution among Christians; but to shew that it has arisen, not from any defect in revelation, but from the weakness or wickedness of mankind; not from the genuine influence of the religion, but from its abuse and perversion; not from true piety and *zeal according to knowledge*, but from ignorance, bigotry, and superstition.

Many other observations will readily occur, which equally tend to exculpate Christianity from the guilt of persecution; and to fix the blame upon the errors and passions of its professors.

On whatever the human mind dwells long and attentively, the passions are apt to grow warm, interested and enthusiastic; and not seldom force into their service the understanding, which they ought to obey. In ordinary affairs the effect is the fancied impor-

tance of a frivolous purſuit, or zeal for a favourite hypotheſis; but in religion it has too often been ſuperſtition, bigotry and perſecution.

Chriſtians, like other men, when in poſſeſſion of civil authority, have ſometimes miſapplied it; and endeavoured to obtain by fear or force that ſubmiſſion in opinion, which ſhould be ſought only by conciliation and conviction. They have too often carried to exceſs their zeal in a good cauſe; in a cauſe which has ſo much influence on human happineſs, that the value of the end in view was thought to juſtify whatever means ſeemed likely to promote it.

If again the corruption of religion, and the abuſe of its name and authority, have really occaſioned in ſociety all the miſchiefs which its adverſaries have ſuppoſed; the moſt natural concluſion is, that where it is rightly underſtood and duly obeyed, its uſe and advantages will be at leaſt of equal extent and magnitude. The evils of miſapplication can be only in proportion to its utility when more wiſely directed.

That

That the Christian religion has been the pretext to conceal or to promote criminal and even impious purposes, cannot be an argument against its truth or its value; unless it can destroy the reality or the advantages of integrity, friendship, or humanity, that they have been assumed as a disguise by those, who intended most grossly to violate the virtues, which it suited their purpose to counterfeit.

These errors, excesses, and abuses Christianity itself is calculated to correct: not indeed miraculously and at once; but by gradually illuminating the minds of men, and rectifying their conduct; not by force and compulsion; but by the introduction of purer principles of action, and stronger motives to their duty. It is observable accordingly, that as the doctrines of Christianity have been more diligently studied and better understood, persecution has proportionably declined. The religion itself best teaches the toleration it requires. We now hear nothing of the flames and the stake in our own country; and not much of the inquisition in any other: and it is hardly more desirable, than it is probable, that they will never be revived.

8. There is yet another ſhape, in which the ſame objection may be conſidered as again brought forward; in that peeviſh complaint, which we hear almoſt every day, againſt the degeneracy of the age; againſt the encreaſing follies and vices of the preſent race of men, compared and contraſted with the wiſdom and the virtues of thoſe who have gone before us. This ſeems indeed to be inſiſted on by the weak, the melancholy, or the malevolent, merely as the ſubject of lamentation and cenſure; rather than as any direct attack upon the truth or the effects of a divine revelation. Yet ſtill ſuch is its obvious tendency; and ſuch muſt be the inference from it. If mankind be in a ſtate of progreſſive corruption; it is clear they cannot have been improved by the influence of Chriſtianity. It ſeems therefore neceſſary, and it does not ſeem difficult, to ſhew that this opinion and complaint have their origin in fallacy and error; in miſtaken premiſes, or miſtaken concluſions.

From the ſame authority, by which we have learned how human nature was firſt brought into exiſtence, we have learned alſo, that it is now leſs pure and perfect than it came

came from the hands of the Creator; that by the tranſgreſſion of the divine command ſin and miſery firſt entered the world. That ſome imperfect account of the fall of man had found its way to the heathen world, is evident both from the fables of their poets and the diſquiſitions of their philoſophers. And when they had been once informed that ſome degeneracy had taken place in human nature, the moſt natural and obvious concluſion was, that ſuch degeneracy muſt have been gradual and progreſſive. This gradual depravation of our nature they have repreſented as ſo many ſucceſſive ages; each under the emblem of a metal leſs pure and precious than that which went immediately before it. Inſtead of the ſtate of innocence, we find them deſcribing an age of gold; and crowding it with all the virtues, which philoſophy could teach, and all the enjoyments, which appetite could deſire. We are then preſented with ages of ſilver and of braſs; and a proportionate decay in the merits and the happineſs of mankind: till each plaintive author finds his own times the iron age, overwhelmed in ignorance, miſery, and corruption. Thus a complaint begun, almoſt with the beginning of the world,

world, from an imperfect knowledge of the truth, may have been continued down to the preſent day from cuſtom and imitation.

Cuſtom and imitation, however, have been by no means the only cauſes, from which the complaint has been continued. All who from vanity have thought their merits injuriouſly neglected; and all who from envy have repined at the proſperity of others; all who from their own malignity have ceaſed to love their fellow-creatures; all who have felt themſelves unhappy, and ſuppoſed their own condition the general condition of life; and all whoſe gloomy diſpoſitions have made them view the objects around them on the leſs favourable ſide; all theſe have been led to ſeek ſullen gratification in railing at the ignorance and corruption of their cotemporaries; and in wiſhing their lives could have been paſſed among wiſer nations, and in happier times.

There is another reaſon for this complaint ſtill more extenſive in its influence, but in its nature equally inconcluſive. We have our knowledge of the vices of former times only from hiſtory; but we ſee and feel the

vices

vices of our own; and hence arise several fallacies, which lead men to believe the latter the more numerous and malignant. By the faults and follies of our cotemporaries our own interest is immediately affected, and all our passions agitated and alarmed. But in the crimes of former ages we have only a remote and feeble concern; and they operate less powerfully on the mind. To compare them therefore is, with common minds, to compare a crime pourtrayed upon canvas, with a crime committed in our sight; it is to compare the flame that glimmers in the atmosphere at a distance, with the flame which threatens our own habitation.

To this must be added, that different vices have prevailed at different periods and in different nations of the world; and men have from this circumstance been led into an unfair estimate of the merits of their own times. Changes, revolutions, and fashions take their turn even in depravity; as well as in the more amiable parts of human conduct. Though our ancestors, therefore, were as corrupt as ourselves; yet they probably differed from us in the kind and manner of their leading vices;

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and the wickedness of which we feel the bad effects, appears to us of all other the most mischievous and intolerable. From the pain we now feel, and from the iniquity which immediately offends us, we are apt to imagine relief would be found by a change for pain in any other situation; for iniquity of any other kind.

Nor must it be forgotten that history attends only to important events, and splendid vices or virtues; to the counsels of senates, and the conduct of commanders; to the ravages of war, and the miseries of a deluge or famine. But by these the happiness of private life is seldom very greatly or permanently affected. That depends chiefly upon incidents and objects, which would be of little consequence, but for their frequency; and of which though each separately produces but a small effect, yet in the aggregate they constitute the misery or the felicity of life. Let any man reflect how much of his pleasure or vexation arises from the good or ill behaviour of a favourite child; from the attention or coldness of a private friend; or from the manner in which the daily wants of his life are

supplied;

ſupplied; and he will ſoon be convinced that he muſt reſt his chance for happineſs in the world on far other cauſes, than the vices or virtues of ſtateſmen, and the revolutions of empires. But tranſactions ſo obſcure and ſo minute the hiſtorian generally thinks it beneath his dignity to diſcuſs or to record; and while the mind is employed upon public tranſactions and important events, the reader ſcarcely turns his attention to the ordinary occurrences of domeſtic life; where pleaſures and ſufferings ariſe in the common methods from common things. While we find not in the page of hiſtory any of thoſe petty vexations, by which we feel our own peace deſtroyed, we are apt to forget that they exiſted; and to imagine that we are harraſſed by depravity, from which former ages were happily exempted.

There is yet another fallacious ground for the complaint againſt the degeneracy of the preſent times. The obſervation is not more common than it is juſt, that of old men it is the peculiar propenſity and the conſtant practice to extol the times of their youth, at the expence of thoſe when they are more advanced in age. And for this propenſity and prac-

tice a variety of cauſes may be aſſigned. When a man's paſſions are weakened and his ſenſations blunted by the hand of time, he receives all the bleſſings of life with leſs alacrity and leſs reliſh; and when we are become leſs capable of enjoyment, it is but too common to conclude, that objects are leſs worth enjoying; that the decay is in nature, and not in ourſelves. While the young and the gay are purſuing their own buſineſs or their own amuſements, the aged ſee themſelves in ſome degree neglected; and the common ſelf-partiality leads them to imagine that when they were to pay reſpect to age, inſtead of receiving it, much more was paid. It is one of the moſt frequent errors of our imagination to ſuppoſe, that we were happier in any paſt ſituation, than in the preſent; and it is peculiarly the misfortune of age to recollect the participation of pleaſures, and to feel only weakneſs and infirmities; and while they are leſs pleaſed with life, by an eaſy miſtake they conclude that life itſelf is leſs pleaſing. Men advanced in age have at length been fully convinced that there is much ſelfiſhneſs and meanneſs in mankind; which while warm in the purſuits of youth,

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and gay in the hopes of happineſs, they either did not perceive, or were not at leiſure to attend to. But painful experience of ſufferings has now ſharpened their ſagacity; what they have recently diſcovered, appears to have recently ariſen; and the ſuppoſed encreaſe of depravity naturally produces or augments their propenſity to cenſure and complain.

It is true that theſe errors and complaints of age do not ariſe immediately from any doubt of the beneficial influence of Chriſtianity; nor have they perhaps ever been directly adduced as an argument againſt it. But ſuch is their natural tendency; and muſt be in ſome degree their ultimate effect. For as they countenance and encourage the notion of the deterioration of preſent objects and preſent times; they neceſſarily deny the improvement of men and morals from the influence of any cauſe; and therefore from the doctrines and precepts of revelation.

II. If then the cauſes that have been ſtated will account ſufficiently for the riſe and continuance, both of the opinion that the influence of Chriſtianity has not been beneficial,

and of the conſequent objection to its efficacy and ſucceſs in its own purpoſes; it ſhould ſeem not unfair to conclude at once, that the true cauſes have been aſſigned; that the opinion is an error, founded upon ſuppoſitions, which are themſelves erroneous; that the objection muſt fall with the fallacies by which it is ſupported. But a ſtill more deciſive anſwer can be given from the evidence of authentic facts. It may be ſhewn that revelation has in a conſiderable degree produced thoſe beneficial effects, which its own records, as well as its advocates, have taught us to expect. And that we may arrive the more ſpeedily at our concluſion; that we may not perplex hiſtorical documents by any abſtract and circuitous reaſoning; let it ſuffice briefly to ſpecify a few of the more obvious inſtances, in which Chriſtianity has accompliſhed its own purpoſes; in which it has diminiſhed the crimes, or encreaſed the virtues of mankind.

1. The firſt and moſt obvious inſtance, in which Chriſtianity has produced improvement, is in our conceptions of the nature of the Deity, and our ſentiments of religion in general;

general; by the exchange of polytheiſm for the belief in the unity of the Godhead; by the abolition of idolatry, with all its abſurdities and impieties; and the introduction of a rational worſhip of the great Creator; and above all, by manifeſting and illuſtrating the benevolence of the Deity, in the ineſtimable offer of redemption, of the pardon of ſin by a Saviour, and of the reſurrection to life and immortality. But as the advantages which religion has derived from revelation have been already inſiſted on*, they need not be again diſcuſſed; and as the improvement of morality is more immediately the point in queſtion, to that our detail ſhall be confined.

2. One of the very valuable improvements, which revelation has introduced into morality is, the placing it upon a baſis of univerſality and perfection. Men have always been inclined to ſuppoſe, that different virtues are of different value; that we are bound to the performance of different duties by obligations of different force; and that the performance accordingly conſtitutes a higher or lower de-

* In Sermon II.

gree of merit. The ſuppoſition too has probably been encouraged by human laws; which have their diſtinctions between perfect and imperfect rights; between duties of perfect and imperfect obligation: and it is obvious indeed that the perpetration of different crimes; that the due diſcharge or the omiſſion of different duties; muſt produce very different degrees of good or evil to individuals and to ſociety. Into the reality or the utility of theſe diſtinctions it is not the preſent intention to enquire. In one inſtance at leaſt, they ſeem to have been prejudicial to ſound morality. They have contributed to create or to confirm the notion, that as ſome duties may be neglected with leſs guilt and danger than others; ſo the fulfilling ſuperior obligations may compenſate for the neglect of inferior; and a compromiſe be made between our duty and our paſſions, between virtue and vice, between God and Mammon.

In the morality of revelation no ſuch diſtinction can be traced. The ſcriptures do not divide our conduct into virtues of higher and lower eſtimation; into duties that muſt be

be performed, and that may be omitted. They teach, not the detail of practice, but the general principle; *to keep a conſcience void of offence*; and to ſhew it by an equal obedience *to every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God.* Their language is, *thou ſhalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy mind; and thy neighbour as thyſelf*; and that *whoſoever ſhall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, is guilty of all.* The ſcriptures then do not make the guilt of a tranſgreſſion to conſiſt ſo much in the tranſgreſſion itſelf, as in the violation of a principle. They do not eſtimate a crime by its incidental conſequences; which the criminal himſelf does not always intend, and can ſeldom calculate; but by the impiety and diſobedience, which it implies. They weigh an offence againſt God, not ſo much by the importance of the duty violated, as by the contempt of his authority; by that corruption of heart, which with appropriate temptation, would violate every other *commandment of the law.* They do not, on the other hand, calculate merely the good that is effected by obedience; but the piety alſo, from which it proceeds. They conſider every

duty as of equal obligation in its own time and place; and every man as equally bound according to his opportunities and his talents; the widow to contribute her mite, and the rich man his abundance; and in proportion, not ſo much to their ſucceſs and its effects, as to their principles and their exertions, will be their merit and their reward.

3. It muſt be conſidered as another good effect of Chriſtianity, that in every country where it has prevailed, it has materially influenced and rectified the public judgment in morals. It has given a fixed and permanent ſtandard of duty; of which all ſects and parties have admitted the excellence and utility; to which a tacit appeal at leaſt is continually made; and which at length in a great degree corrects and regulates the opinion of the public. Too many inſtances indeed of immoral and irreligious conduct may ſtill be found: but they have not the encouragement of general approbation; they are rarely tolerated as innocent; and ſtill more rarely applauded as virtuous. Daily intercourſe and converſation are leſs licentious; criminal exceſs is not an ordinary ſubject of oſtentation

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and vain-glory; and immorality leſs frequently and leſs groſsly contaminates the national amuſements. By this means an eſſential ſervice is done to ſociety. In the moſt improved ages of Greece and Rome vices were practiſed openly and without a bluſh; which in Chriſtian countries are not mentioned but in terms of deteſtation. In the latter it is obvious indeed that many, who would diſregard religion, are kept within the bounds of duty, or of decency, by a ſenſe of ſhame; and habit may in time ripen into principle. Others again, who cannot be ſtimulated to virtue, are driven to ſilence and ſecrecy in their vices; and diffuſe leſs widely the contagion of their ſentiments and their example. And perhaps a ſtill greater number act uprightly from principles, which they ſuppoſe to be derived from the light and inſtincts of nature, from the deductions of their own reaſon, or the dictates of their own conſcience; but which in reality have been imbibed from the public opinion; and from that truth and rectitude, which Chriſtianity has given it. This is indeed one of the good effects of the goſpel, of which the extent and value cannot be preciſely aſcertained; but

which, till the fact can be diſputed, none will deny to be important, who are ſenſible of what importance it is, to have public opinion on the ſide of religion and virtue.

4. One of the moſt extenſive benefits of Chriſtianity to human conduct is felt in the improvement of our ſyſtems of national policy; in an amendment of the principles of government and legiſlation. The political eſtabliſhments of the heathens were but ill adapted to the great purpoſes, to which all government ſhould be directed, the advancement of the virtue and happineſs of mankind. They were in general nothing more than the conciſe ſyſtem of deſpotiſm in the prince and ſlavery in the people; and therefore of continual anxiety, ſuſpicion, and cruelty in the ſovereign; and poverty fear and miſery in the ſubject. Thus wretched were their monarchies; and the happineſs of the people was no way more effectually ſecured in their boaſted republics. In theſe by far the greater part of every community were in name and in reality ſlaves: and if we enquire into the treatment of theſe unfortunate men, we ſhall find they were ſubjected to the ſevereſt and

moſt

moſt unjuſtifiable tyranny, that man ever exerciſed upon man. The citizens themſelves were indeed flattered with the notion and the name of liberty; but with an exception only of thoſe ſeaſons of tumult and anarchy, to which the nature of their government was peculiarly expoſed, they were continually enſlaved to ſuch ambitious demagogues, as had inclination and abilities to obtain popularity and power. And hence the hiſtory of an antient commonwealth, as has been juſtly obſerved, is little elſe than the hiſtory of a few illuſtrious individuals, who were ſucceſſively its maſters. Nor were theſe illuſtrious individuals themſelves in a ſituation much to be envied. Even in Athens itſelf, the proudeſt ſeat of antient ſcience, and the proudeſt boaſt of the modern philoſopher, ſuperior talents, virtue, and patriotiſm could ſeldom ſecure to their poſſeſſors permanent eſteem and honour; and not always perſonal ſafety. By their tribunals of juſtice Miltiades was ſentenced to a priſon, Ariſtides to exile, and Socrates to death.

That theſe evils have been ſoftened and diminiſhed by the benign influence of Chriſ-

tianity, it will require no great ſagacity to diſcover; no tedious diſquiſition to demonſtrate. In political eſtabliſhments our Saviour never directly interfered; intending, no doubt, that the external regulations, the rites and ceremonies, of a religion deſigned for univerſality, ſhould be adapted to the circumſtances and the civil government of each reſpective country; and well knowing that the religion itſelf would teach us equity and moderation on the beſt of all principles; the natural equality of men in the ſight of God: not indeed the viſionary and ruinous equality of the republican and the leveller; but an equality at once real, rational, and beneficial. Chriſtianity inſtructs us to look upon all mankind as our brethren; as the offspring of the ſame common parent: not as entitled to any equality of poſſeſſions or endowments; but as heirs of the ſame nature, and the ſame frailties; as created for ſociety, and ſubordination to each other; but as ſubjects of the ſame almighty governor; truſting for pardon of our offences to the ſame redeemer and judge; and enjoined to practiſe the ſame duties, under the hope and promiſe of the ſame rewards. Thus the foundation of civil

policy

policy is laid in general humanity; and our duty to man built upon the immoveable baſis of our duty to God.

The effects of theſe doctrines upon political government may at firſt ſight appear but remote, indirect, and incidental; yet are they natural and certain; and wherever the Chriſtian religion in any great degree prevails are felt and confeſſed. It was the firſt Chriſtian emperor that united humanity with his policy. Conſtantine firſt ſoftened the ſeverity of legal penalties; alleviated the hardſhips, to which ſlaves were condemned; and above all, gave ſupreme authority to the laws; and fixed them as a rule of conduct obligatory alike upon the ſovereign and the ſubject. It was from the benign influence of the Chriſtian revelation that the codes of Theodoſius and Juſtinian excelled all the ſyſtems which had gone before them; and gave a principle and a baſis to all ſucceeding inſtitutions. The goſpel has not, it is needleſs to obſerve, either eradicated the inordinate love of power from the minds of its profeſſors; or univerſally prevented its abuſe. It has not perfected human policy; becauſe it has not yet perfected human

morals. But it has been the principal cauſe, why the aſperites of different ranks of men are ſoftened towards each other; why magiſtrates are moderate in the exerciſe of authority, and the people conſcientious in their ſubjection to the laws; why *the rich and the poor meet peaceably together, knowing that the Lord is the maker of them all.*

5. The moſt dreadful and deſtructive of all human tranſactions is national war; and this too has felt the benign influence of our religion. Amongſt the nations of antiquity the arts of peace were held but in a ſecondary eſtimation. Perſonal ſtrength and agility, ſkill and bravery in combat, were the qualities moſt highly valued: and the ſtudy, the employment, and the ambition of almoſt every people was war, victory, and conqueſt. Theſe wars too were commenced upon ſuch motives, and conducted upon ſuch principles, as were no leſs inconſiſtent with ſound policy, than with juſtice and humanity. The conqueror, from the deſire of revenge, the love of plunder, or the wantonneſs of cruelty, frequently ravaged in ſuch a manner the countries he had conquered, as to ſeize or deſtroy all the neceſ-

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ſaries of life; and ſometimes to extirpate the people. The unfortunate captives too were generally either put to the ſword in cold blood; offered in ſuperſtitious ſacrifice to *them that are no Gods*; or reſerved for a fate ſtill more wretched, and ſold into ſlavery for the reſt of life.

Between Chriſtian nations theſe aggravations of the natural horrors of war are ſoftened or excluded. Hoſtility ceaſes with reſiſtance: unneceſſary violence is ſyſtematically avoided; and the perſons and properties of individuals, as far as poſſible, protected. The wounded are treated even by their enemies with tenderneſs; and the priſoners with generoſity. Conquered provinces are governed with equity; and the immediate miniſters in this unnatural trade are uſually conſidered as the models of delicacy of ſentiment and elegance of manners. This mercy and moderation, however, can be traced no higher than to the eſtabliſhment and influence of the principles of the goſpel. When Rome was ſtormed and plundered by the Goths, Alaric and his army gave an example of humanity to their vanquiſhed enemies,

mies, not leſs to be admired for its novelty, than applauded for its merit*. Since that era wars and their cruelties, amongſt the profeſſors of Chriſtianity at leaſt, have gradually declined: and it is almoſt as reaſonable, as it is pleaſing, to hope, that the time will come, when both ſhall ceaſe; when the prediction of the prophet ſhall be literally fulfilled; and men *ſhall beat their ſwords into ploughſhares, and their ſpears into pruning-hooks; when nation ſhall not lift up ſword againſt nation, neither ſhall they learn war any more:* when indeed nation ſhall viſit nation, bringing with them, not the inſtruments of war and the engines of deſtruction, but the arts of peace, and the comforts of life: when fleets ſhall traverſe the ocean, not to tranſport the ſoldier and the plunderer, but the teachers of wiſdom, and the miniſters of the goſpel: when the unlettered Indian ſhall change his apprehenſions of a robber in every European, for the expectation of a benefactor; and his fears of death or ſlavery, for the proſpects of revelation, and the hope of everlaſting life.

* Aug. De Civit. Dei, lib. 1.

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6. Never perhaps did any thing under the name and character of a public amuſement, ſo flagrantly violate both good morals and humanity, as the combats of the gladiators on the amphitheatre at Rome. Yet did theſe combats ſubſiſt for centuries in the moſt enlightened nation of the world, ſanctioned by the taſte of the people, and protected by the laws. The firſt edicts which condemned them were publiſhed by the Chriſtian emperors; and theſe edicts owed their efficacy and ſucceſs to the zeal and ſpirit of a Chriſtian prieſt. That his life fell a ſacrifice to the reſentment of the populace is indeed to be lamented; but cannot deprive his memory and his principles of the honour of a ſucceſsful oppoſition to ſo ſanguinary a practice: for the combats of the gladiators have never ſince polluted a public theatre, or diſgraced the Chriſtian name*.

7. Many other inſtances, in which Chriſtianity has contributed to the improvement of morality, may eaſily be produced; and a few ſhall be conciſely ſtated.

* Gibb. Rom. Emp. chap. 30.

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In the article of higheſt importance to domeſtic happineſs, the conjugal union, Chriſtianity and its teachers have introduced the moſt rational regulations, not only for its formation, but for its diſſolution. They have, on one hand, baniſhed polygamy; and on the other, reſtrained the right of divorce to its proper cauſe; the violation, by one of the parties, of the fundamental principle of their contract and their vows.

In a point immediately connected with the former, and of no leſs importance, we are again greatly indebted to Chriſtianity. An unnatural parent is no longer permitted to immolate his child in ſuperſtitious ſacrifice; or, what was a practice ſtill more general amongſt the heathens, to expoſe the infant, which he does not wiſh to rear; to reduce by the moſt unfeeling calculation the number of his children to his circumſtances; and to educate ſuch only as he judges likely to bring honour or advantage to his family or himſelf. The parent, who ſhould now attempt this in a Chriſtian country, would be ſtigmatiſed by public opinion as a monſter, and puniſhed as a criminal by the laws.

In Roman morality, even in its brighteſt era, ſuicide was not conſidered as a crime. It was indeed rather thought to confer new dignity on the character of the perpetrator. It was encouraged by the example of the hero; and vindicated in the diſquiſition of the philoſopher. Under the goſpel it is more juſtly conſidered as murder with its worſt aggravations; as an offence againſt nature, as well as againſt duty; as a deteſtable complication of cowardice with guilt.

To the influence of Chriſtianity we owe almoſt excluſively one of the beſt exertions of philanthropy, eleemoſynary eſtabliſhments: not only the legal and regular proviſion for the poor; but the voluntary contributions of the liberal and wealthy in a thouſand ways; our collections at religious feſtivals, and in ſeaſons of ſcarcity; our ſchools of charity, for the education of the children of the unfortunate and neceſſitous; our hoſpitals, for the retreat of age, misfortune, or diſeaſe.

Theſe, and ſuch as theſe, are the improvements which we aſcribe with gratitude to the Chriſtian revelation. That moſt of them

them are juſtly aſcribed to it, can be ſhewn from unqueſtioned records of hiſtory; and it is ſurely fair to attribute the reſt to the ſame cauſe; as they cannot with fairneſs be imputed to any other. In the times antecedent to our Saviour's appearance in the world no ſuch improvements can be traced. But as ſoon as his religion obtained influence and eſtabliſhment, they began to be ſeen and felt; and by a gradual, though not regular progreſs, have attained to their preſent ſtate. It is not, however, with a view to flatter the preſent ſtate of morals, that theſe improvements have been ſpecified. For it is not to be diſſembled, that we are yet at a melancholy diſtance from that purity and perfection, which revelation has preſcribed. Our ſuperiority over our heathen anceſtors has been inſiſted on, not to exalt ourſelves, but the religion we profeſs; not to extol the ways of men, but to juſtify the ways of God. It is to repel the objection brought againſt Chriſtianity from its ſuppoſed inefficacy; to ſhew that it has long ſince begun to produce the reformation it promiſed; that this reformation is ſtill in progreſs; and that in all probability every pretext for the objection

jection will at laſt be removed. The time, we truſt, will come when Chriſtianity ſhall be ſo fully and univerſally obeyed, that the moſt magnificent predictions of its prophets ſhall be accompliſhed; when *they ſhall not hurt nor deſtroy in all the holy mountain** ; and *the earth ſhall be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord*†.

8. I have now conſidered as many of the difficulties reſpecting the truth and credibility of divine revelation, as the limits of the preſent lecture will admit; and in conſidering them the aim and object have been to ſhew, not that the difficulties do not exiſt; but that they are not inſuperable; not that the objections are wholly groundleſs; but that they are not concluſive againſt the divine origin of Chriſtianity. In each of the points that have been examined; in the variety of religions in the world, or in the variety of opinions upon them; in the real weakneſs and boaſted ſtrength of human reaſon; or in the nature and neceſſity of a divine reve-

* Iſai. xi. 9. † Hab. ii. 14.

lation; in the precepts of the goſpel, as they affect the enjoyments of the preſent life; in the myſterious doctrines, which it contains; or in the duties of worſhip, which it preſcribes; in the want of univerſality in its publication and reception; or in its want of due influence on the lives of its profeſſors; in each of theſe the attempt has been to prove, that there is nothing inconſiſtent with itſelf, or with the attributes of the Deity; nothing unſuitable to the nature of a divine revelation, or to the beneficial purpoſes, which it profeſſes to promote; nothing irreconcileable to the truth of prophecy; or inadmiſſible as articles of faith by the human mind. If this can be effected, the poſitive evidence will then operate in its full force; and by that, and that only, muſt the divine origin of the goſpel finally ſtand or fall. But in proportion as objection is invalidated, the grounds of faith are ſtrengthened; as perplexity and deluſion are diſſipated, the mind is open to truth and conviction. Whatever is not phyſically impoſſible, is credible when competent witneſſes are produced; and the Chriſtian revelation is

is to be believed, not becauſe every difficulty can be clearly ſolved, or every article demonſtrated; but becauſe there is adequate evidence; evidence as ſtrong as the facts are extraordinary; to us at preſent, indeed, the uſual evidence of hiſtory; though from peculiar circumſtances entitled to more than uſual credit; but in its origin, and its firſt teachers, preternatural teſtimony to preternatural truth.

The Chriſtian Revelation, however, is to be recommended, not merely becauſe it has the advantage in point of argument; the preponderance of probability, and *a cloud of witneſſes* in its favour; but becauſe it offers bleſſings, with which no other objects of human purſuit can come in competition; becauſe it is every way ſuperior to every other ſyſtem of faith and hope. To our duty it inſeparably connects our intereſt; and unites the beſt affections of the heart with the beſt concluſions of the underſtanding.

Were the arguments for and againſt a future ſtate equal; were the difficulties a balance to the evidence; ſtill it would be wiſ-

dom to ſecure the better ſide of ſo important an alternative, by a faithful diſcharge of the duties of our ſtation. In the preſent life it is always thought prudent and creditable, to take the chances in our favour; to incline to the ſide of ſafety. Should we not take ſome care to provide for the ineſtimable chances of eternity! In this life too, where the point is doubtful, we may often ſuſpend our judgment without miſchief or danger; where we know not how to act right, we may refuſe to act at all. But on the queſtion of revelation a deciſion muſt be made. We are not permitted to take a middle courſe between faith and infidelity, between duty and diſobedience. The Creator will not ſhare his honour with his creatures: we cannot divide our ſervices between God and Mammon.

If again we reject the Chriſtian revelation, we are launched into an ocean of uncertainty both in principle and practice; with no compaſs to direct, no friendly ſtar to guide us to the haven of ſatisfaction or ſafety. Philoſophy cannot inform us whence we came; or whither we are appointed to go. It leaves us to comfort or torment each other for a ſea-

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ſon, to enjoy or ſuffer, as it may happen, and ere long to bow beneath the ſtroke of death; of which it can tell us neither the cauſe, the manner, nor the end. But revelation offers a ſolution of all theſe difficulties; a light to guide our ſteps through this labyrinth of darkneſs. It points out both the courſe we ought to purſue, and abundant motives to purſue it. Of our duty it has proclaimed the nature and the end, the performance and the recompence. Revelation has furniſhed the proper object of faith, and confidence to hope: it has ſupplied alleviation to misfortune, and conſolation even in death; for it has promiſed to virtue ſupport and reward. Had Cicero been acquainted with the doctrines of Chriſtianity, he would not have maintained, that he was the only wiſe man, who had extinguiſhed his paſſions: and had Brutus known them, he would not have pronounced virtue to be only a ſhadow.

What is the chief good of man, was a queſtion which the philoſophers of antiquity inceſſantly diſcuſſed, but were never able to determine. In the indulgence of their ſenſes they found not gratification adequate to their

capacities: and the exercise of virtue was exposed to difficulties and vexations, of which they could not perceive the cause or the advantage. Whether they chose a public or a private station; an active or a contemplative life; they were still disappointed of the happiness, for which they believed man to be formed, and which they felt that he desired. Where it was to be found, or why it was with-held, they were equally unable to discover. By revelation the question is decided, and the perplexity removed. The practice of virtue is the task appointed for us; its difficulties are our probation; and its reward our greatest good. To promote the happiness of others in order to secure our own, is at once the essence of our duty and the end. This is at present an object of desire adequate to our capacities, and will hereafter be an adequate gratification.

But when philosophy teaches infidelity, it shrinks still further from a comparison with the Christian revelation. Christianity every way exalts human nature; while by infidelity it is every way degraded and debased. Infidelity lets loose the worst passions of the heart;

all that corrupt the individual, and diſturb the peace of ſociety. But Chriſtianity points our affections to their proper objects, and confines them within ſuch bounds, as would at once ſecure the intereſts of thoſe about us, and the tranquillity of our minds. Infidelity would ſink us nearly to a level with *the beaſts that periſh*; and Chriſtianity exalts us to the ſociety of angels of light. Infidelity limits our enjoyments and our proſpects to a few years of precarious life on earth, and its ſtill more precarious pleaſures; while Chriſtianity teaches us to aſpire to glory and immortality in heaven. Infidelity leaves us the ſons of ſinful men; and Chriſtianity makes us by adoption the ſons of God.

It is another important recommendation of the goſpel, that it has placed our duty upon an explicit and intelligible baſis; the will and word of God. In the precepts of Chriſtianity this principle is every where implied or expreſſed; either directly aſſigned, or recogniſed as already known. We need not therefore now engage in any intricate diſquiſitions on the laws of nature and right reaſon; on the love of virtue for its own ſake; or a con-

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duct agreeable to the fitneſs of things. We need not perplex ourſelves with deep and unavailing reſearches into the foundation of the rule of right; the ſtandard of truth; or the origin of obligation. God himſelf has condeſcended to be our inſtructor. His commands are the rule of right; his authority is obligation; and the ſanction our own good. Obedience is virtue, and diſobedience ſin. The former enſures his approbation, and our own happineſs; and the latter incurs his diſpleaſure, and our puniſhment.

Of the Deity too revelation, and revelation only, has vindicated the nature and perfections. It has not only aſſerted the exiſtence of his moral attributes; but ſhewn their conſiſtency with the viſible ſyſtem of the world, and the preſent circumſtances of mankind. Of theſe infidelity could give no ſatisfactory account. It aſcribed them to a fortuitous concourſe of atoms; to a blind and capricious chance; or to a fixed and reſiſtleſs fate; to principles it could not explain; to names that had no meaning. Revelation has ſhewn that the end of our creation was our own happineſs; and has aſſigned the cauſes, why this

happineſs

happineſs is not immediately and univerſally obtained. It has explained how diſobedience to the laws of God is conſiſtent with his providence and juſtice; how the exiſtence of phyſical evil may be reconciled to his goodneſs; our imperfections to his wiſdom; and our ſufferings to his mercy. It has taught us reſignation to the divine will on rational and intelligible principles; and reconciled chearfulneſs in obedience with the ſeeming ſeverity of our taſk. It is thus that the goſpel has made the preſent condition of man and the viſible ſyſtem of creation bear teſtimony to its own truth and authenticity. It has eſtabliſhed itſelf upon a baſis, which true philoſophy could not have diſcovered; and againſt which, we are aſſured, falſe philoſophy ſhall not prevail.

If, however, doubts are ſtill entertained, and objections continue to be urged; each ſhould be conſidered as an additional incitement to our zeal and diligence in the cauſe. The ignorance and vices of one part of mankind give exerciſe and value to the wiſdom and virtues of the reſt. And while providence permits the influence of the goſpel to be only

partial and imperfect, he ſeems to intend it as an opportunity for us to perform the moſt important duties; to enhance our own merit. If Chriſtianity is not yet univerſally known, or not duly obeyed; it is incumbent upon us to endeavour to propagate its doctrines by our inſtruction, and to give effect to its precepts by our example. One of the nobleſt inſtances of virtue is, to make others virtuous: one of the beſt exertions of benevolence is, to teach men to believe and to obey the goſpel. And to this duty, as to every other, is annexed *the recompence of reward.* To the apoſtles, as firſt in dignity and deſert amongſt the teachers of Chriſtianity, it was promiſed, that they ſhould *ſit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Iſrael:* and for the encouragement of all others, the prophet has aſſured us, that *they that be wiſe ſhall ſhine as the brightneſs of the firmament; and they that turn many to righteouſneſs, as the ſtars for ever and ever.*

Finally and above all, the great end and aim of Chriſtianity is not ſpeculation, but practice; not controverſy, but peace: it is not ſo much the purſuit of ſcience, as of virtue; it is obedience, as well as faith. The glorious ſcheme of man's redemption was not commu-

communicated to us merely to excite our admiration, and to ſhew its ſuperiority over reaſon and philoſophy; but to teach us our duty, and to regulate our ſentiments and conduct. Futurity is not a land of fancy and fiction; in which we have no further concern than to amuſe our leiſure or delight our imagination with its beauties; but it is *the lot of our inheritance, the country of our hope.* Chriſt Jeſus is not the creature of poetry, or the hero of a romance; on whoſe character and actions we need only exerciſe our critical ſagacity, and ſhew our dexterity in argument; but he is *the author and finiſher of our faith,* the example of our morals, and *the propitiation for our ſins.* The poſſeſſion of knowledge ſuperior to the acquiſitions of the ſages of antiquity will only expoſe us to a ſeverer ſentence, unleſs we attain to ſuperior merit. *If our righteouſneſs do not exceed the righteouſneſs* of the Pagans, *they will riſe up in judgment againſt us, and will condemn us.* To hear and to believe the goſpel has little uſe or value, but as the foundation and the principle of religious and moral duties. *Faith without works is dead.* It is only by our prayers and our alms together, by piety united with

with charity, that we can render ourselves acceptable to our God. And *do thou, Oh Lord, who hast caused all holy scriptures to be written for our learning, grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them; that by patience and comfort of thy holy word, we may embrace, and ever hold fast, the blessed hope of everlasting life; which thou hast given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ.* Amen.

FINIS.